Policy/impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region

Final report

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Abbreviations

AF	Annual Forum
AT	Austria
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CF	Cohesion Fund
DG REGIO	European Commission, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy
DSP	Danube Strategy Point
DTP	Danube Transnational Programme
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EIP	Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EQ	Evaluation questions
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
EU MRS Week	EU Macro-regional Week
FB	Facebook
HLG	High Level Group
HU	Hungary
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
MA	Managing Authority(ies)
MD	Moldova
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
ME	Montenegro
MRS	Macro-regional Strategy(ies)
NCs	National Coordinators
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (now also called Global Europe)
LN	LinkedIn
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAs	Priority Areas
PACs	Priority Area Coordinator
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
RRP	Recovery and Resilience Plan(s)
RS	Serbia
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SGs	Steering Groups
SG members	Steering Group members
SI	Slovenia
ToC	Theory of Change
TW	Twitter
UA	Ukraine
UN	United Nations
YT	YouTube

Foreword in the light of current events

On 24 February 2022 Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine whose four regions are officially part of the territorial coverage of the EUSDR. The attacks and reported atrocities in a Danube Region country are being observed with more than a heavy heart across the whole regional community. The EUSDR TRIO Presidency strongly condemned the 'unprovoked, illicit and unjust military aggression', expressed 'its solidarity with the people of Ukraine' and called 'to immediately cease the hostilities and to seek solutions by diplomacy.'

The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 already relates to the annexation of the Crimea by Russia in 2014 by pointing at the importance of EU integration: 'Overall, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region has a crucial role in the deepening of EU integration, collaborating with candidate countries, and enhancing cooperation with non-EU neighbours, which has become even more important for Ukraine since 2014.'

The Ukrainian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which officially started after the Annual Forum in October 2021, has widely been welcomed. Ukraine took over the Presidency as the first non-EU country and started with huge motivation and ambition. Following the outbreak of the war, Ukraine had to halt their EUSDR Presidency activities. The 3rd European macro-regional strategies week in the first half of March 2022 included a video message from the Ukrainian Presidency and strong condemnation of the Russian activities was expressed by all macro-regions, with stakeholders reiterating their support for Ukraine. On 23 March 2022 the EUSDR National Coordinators (NC) in a written procedure formally endorsed a Temporary EUSDR Presidency to be held by the remaining members of the TRIO - the NCs of Slovakia and Slovenia, supported by the Danube Strategy Point. For the time being, the Temporary EUSDR Presidency takes over the EUSDR Presidency's duties and tasks until the Ukrainian National Coordination informs otherwise.

As the evaluation team, we are finalising this report amidst these fundamental events that have changed the context for the EUSDR. Data collection, information analysis as well as drafting this report was largely undertaken before the war. There will be changes to the EUSDR and the broader geo-political setting as well as to priorities for cooperation in the Danube Region. In view of the uncertain situation, this report is unable to provide an in-depth analysis of what these developments mean for EUSDR and cooperation. In this foreword, we attempt to note some broad implications for different cooperation fields under the EUSDR umbrella, limiting ourselves to these to avoid speculation. At the same time, we are convinced that the general findings and conclusions remain valid for most countries, as the evaluation focuses on implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020.

The different EUSDR thematic cooperation areas have various governance and political backgrounds, as well as diverse challenges to overcome. The first EUSDR Pillar 'Connecting the Region' Priority Area (PA) 1A on inland waterways, for example, focuses directly on the Danube. While the river itself and the immediate shipping activities on the Danube can continue, shipping may experience changes due to the increased Russian presence in the Black Sea. The work of the Danube Commission, one of the key governance bodies of which Russia and Ukraine are important members, will be influenced by the Russian position. In PA 1B, focusing on transport, a key goal is to support implementation of the TEN-T corridors, as well as to identify new spatial priorities for transport infrastructure. Given the destruction of the war, the development of infrastructure connectivity in the region will remain significant. Also

important is that Ukraine is part of the Priority Area Coordinator (PAC) team with Serbia and Slovenia. In PA 2, on sustainable energy, the geo-political debates have always been present, not least about the construction of North European Gas Pipelines strengthening Europe's energy security. The work of the PA will be impacted by changing political narratives in the region for a more energy independent Europe. This includes continuing to develop renewable energy sources and, depending on the outcomes of this war, the role of pipelines that enter Europe through Ukraine. In PA 3, focusing on culture and tourism, cultural similarities and disparities will remain important. People to people contacts may be even more important as huge migration flows are expected within the region, while at the same time cultural centres might have been destroyed or damaged.

In the three environmental PAs on water quality (PA 4), environmental risks (PA 5) and biodiversity and air and soil quality (PA 6) under the second EUSDR Pillar 'Protecting the Environment', the impacts largely depend on territorial developments, such as the environmentally sensitive Danube delta that crosses the Romania-Ukraine border. With a changing political situation and new border arrangements, other topics such as black-markets for sturgeon caviar may find new dynamics.

In the PAs for the knowledge society (PA 7), competitiveness of enterprises (PA 8), and people and skills (PA 9) under the third EUSDR Pillar 'Building Prosperity', cooperation will remain extremely important, specifically in a post-war world. In PA 9, Ukraine is also part of the PAC team. The work is not just important for potential economic and skills development, but also to support the integration of refugees from Ukraine in labour markets. On governance, Ukraine's future coordination role in PA 9 and PA 1b will be essential.

In the fourth EUSDR Pillar 'Strengthening the region', PA 10 on institutional capacity and cooperation, recent efforts have been put into youth engagement, which is important given the changing political landscape. Further, institutional capacity development will play an even bigger role with further EU integration that would benefit from speedier routes or alternative programmes, where capacity building is pivotal. In PA 11 on security, the changing geopolitical situation will fundamentally change cooperation and, hence, the priorities.

We do not know, of course, if and when this hostile situation will end, or how this will develop further. The coming weeks, months and possibly also years will bring new dynamics to the European integration discourse and may cause substantial changes for the Danube Region. But what is clear is that cooperation within the region across borders is more important than ever.

1 Executive Summary

This EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) impact evaluation started in August 2021 and was finalised in spring 2022. In the last two months of this study one Danube Region country was suffering a continuous act of aggression. After almost 80 years of peace and prosperity there is again war in Europe. The Russian attack on a sovereign Ukraine has put core European values of democracy and solidarity at stake. Four Ukrainian regions are part of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency started on 1 November 2021 with huge motivation and ambition. This was widely welcomed as the first presidency by a non-EU country of a country that sees its future within the family of other European countries. Not many then expected that Ukraine would be proving its right to be a part of Europe by means other than diplomacy. On behalf of the Danube region community the EUSDR TRIO Presidency strongly condemned the 'unprovoked, illicit and unjust military aggression', expressing 'its solidarity with the people of Ukraine'. A Temporary EUSDR Presidency is now being held by the remaining members of the TRIO - the National Coordinators of Slovakia and Slovenia, supported by the Danube Strategy Point.

The main activities of the EUSDR impact evaluation including data collection, analysis of information as well as drafting the main part of the report were undertaken before the war in Ukraine started. It is clear that there will be implications for the EUSDR and the broader geo-political setting as well as for cooperation in the Danube Region. In view of the uncertain situation and to avoid speculation, this report is not able to provide an in-depth analysis of what these developments mean for the EUSDR and the cooperation. At the same time, the general findings, conclusions and recommendations remain valid for most countries.

The EUSDR impact evaluation answers nine evaluation questions structured along four themes: (A) implementation, (B) impact, (C) communication and (D) effects of COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation builds on the complex intervention logic of the EUSDR and its recent alignments, namely the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. The theory-based evaluation focuses on changes envisaged by the Strategy and looks to identify and assess the processes behind the changes.

A macro-regional strategy is implemented under complex policy frameworks and tackles at least three types or levels of activity: the strategic level, the level of thematic implementation and the governance level. The evaluation reviews implementation and progress by all three action lines, even though they are not always distinctly differentiated. Harmonising the conclusions was one of the main challenges of this study.

For (A) implementation the study has concluded that:

1. The actions and targets of PAs as defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 are coherent, relevant, appropriate, and realistic. There is strong vertical internal coherence between the actions and targets within each PA with a few minor gaps in some PAs. The horizontal coherence across PAs is less visible though there are synergies. The actions and targets are appropriate, so the agreed strategic approach is suitable for reaching the EUSDR goals. Being broad and all-encompassing the actions and targets are relevant to a wide range of regional

stakeholders. Given the competence and capacities of EUSDR stakeholders, the revised actions and targets are realistic.

2. All PAs report progress on activities under the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. As flexible as they are, most targets and objectives will probably be achieved. The progress is gradual and satisfactory considering the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic that broke out as the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 was launched.

3. The dynamic changes in the EUSDR governance structure and the development of the new monitoring system have addressed the existing needs. The EUSDR stakeholders are satisfied with the governance structure and consider it efficient. The work of the DSP is effective in supporting the Strategy. There is no demand for new tools or processes but rather for more efficient use of existing frameworks. A monitoring system that facilitates submission of different reporting tools is a good development.

For (B) impact it has been concluded that:

4. The impact generated by the EUSDR can be expected in all policy fields tackled by the Strategy, particularly environmental, external and regional development policies. Important effects are expected in all PAs, namely in the form of capacity change (e.g., increased capacity, more knowledge), behaviour change (e.g. new priorities, collaboration, networking) or policy change (e.g., new or changed programmes, investment decisions). The macro-regional strategy alone cannot produce substantial impact but rather is expected to contribute to desirable changes in enabling factors such as collaboration, communication, capacity, and knowledge generation to influence changes in policies and decision-making. For even more impact, there is unexploited potential for all PAs to contribute to horizontal and strategic objectives, using more integrated approaches (cross-PA cooperation) to solve problems or prepare transformation.

5. The EUSDR objectives are coherent and aligned with wider policy objectives. The EUSDR contributes significantly towards EU Cohesion Policy goals, as well as to integration linked to the EU Enlargement and EU Neighbourhood policy. There should be some contributions to the European Green Deal and Digital Europe, as well as recovery and resilience objectives. Contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are expected to be low considering the resources for EUSDR implementation and external factors, such as climate change, loss of biodiversity and socioeconomic disparities, as well as air, water and soil pollution.

6. The EUSDR embedding process is very comprehensive and complete. It has been built on continuous efforts to show national and regional authorities how to align new programmes with the EUSDR and facilitate contributions. The EUSDR support for embedding has been extensive and complete, highly useful and efficient. Valuable instruments, such as the ERDF/CF and ESF managing authorities' network and the IPA/NDICI programming authorities network facilitate continuous embedding.

For (C) communication:

7. Increased citizen awareness of the EUSDR shows that communication has been effective. External communication has been improved by new strategic documents. Most communication measures for the two external target groups, namely, 'Institutional/Government' and 'Civil society/Business sector', are appropriate. Their efficiency, however, varies greatly depending on the knowledge of individuals in these groups, which is diverse. Events are considered the most appropriate and efficient communication measures method for the external target groups. There is increased appreciation of internal communication measures by EUSDR stakeholders. PAC meetings and NC platforms/networks are noted as the most appropriate.

8. The EUSDR narratives focusing on cooperation and the resulting wellbeing make the most effective communication. Common concepts of togetherness, unity, joint actions and coordination most often showcase the thematic categories of water, youth, culture and EU enlargement. Success stories demonstrating the fruits of a decade long cooperation are valuable selling points of the EUSDR. Narratives on more strategic and wider storylines of EUSDR action, rather than PA-centred messages are important to bridge the Strategy with EU agendas. Storytelling about EUSDR achievements is successful at all levels - thematic, strategic and governance.

(D) COVID-19 pandemic:

9. COVID-19 had a significant influence on implementing the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic had an impact especially on travel restrictions, tourism, economic recession, interrupted global value chains and new EU instruments. These have changed how the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and its implementation can be interpreted. Despite the obvious negative effects on personal contact, networking and coordination, many stakeholders also indicated positive effects from digitalisation, lower travel costs and wider outreach due to digital/videoconference formats for meetings and conferences. Specific effects on the EUSDR impacts have been identified, though it seems too early to assess these. The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 has not lost its relevance and appropriateness due to COVID-19.

To summarise the findings, the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 is going well. The Strategy is being implemented based on a solid governance structure and with a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities that only need fine-tuning in specific cases (e.g., when new staff take over the EUSDR tasks). Processes and tools effectively support the implementation. Administrative tasks such as reporting, internal communication and coordination with multiple stakeholders within and outside the EUSDR system produce a workload that is highly relevant for the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan 2020. This might be seen as burdensome, especially by the professionals that do not work full-time on the EUSDR implementation.

In the positive context of implementation, five recommendations could increase efficiency for EUSDR stakeholders and, especially, maximise the impact and contribution to wider policy objectives.

1. Ensure that all PAs can and know how to contribute to overarching objectives and horizontal topics. EUSDR impact on these horizontal topics can be much more visible and relevant with a common agenda for all PAs to contribute within their domain. This might be achieved through capacity

building for the EUSDR stakeholders, cross-PA activities on horizontal frameworks and joint reflections on missions, impacts and achievements. The recommendation is to not increase administrative burden on key stakeholders such as PACs or NCs (for example by asking them for additional projects or actions), but rather to work on a cross-PA approach with strategic workshops on horizontal topics (digitalisation, smart specialisation, climate change/energy, SDGs) and develop a common agenda for how each PA can contribute to and/or benefit from these frameworks. This would help to build capacity, understanding and the feeling that all contribute together (not each PA on its own). Time could be allocated to allow for more strategic-oriented activities.

2. Review how the EUSDR can deal with more immediate cross-cutting requirements for action such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the circular economy and youth involvement. Although these topics are increasingly addressed in the EUSDR events, properly integrating them into the overall Strategy rationale should be combined with strengthening the horizontal topics of climate change and sustainable development.

3. While the EUSDR implementation has reached a certain level of maturity, ongoing empowerment of key stakeholders is required to facilitate wider impact. This refers, for example, to increased outreach beyond core groups and to more professional communication of the EUSDR implementation. Connecting policy, science, business and civil society experts from all the EUSDR countries continues to be a key function of the EUSDR.

4. Take on board the positive lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, for example the benefits of online meetings and virtual conferences that increase outreach and the participation. Lessons learned and good practices from each PA should be collected and shared with all PAs.

5. Finally, the evaluation reflects on the complexity of the EUSDR implementation. The recommendation is to develop a common EUSDR impact model that structures activities at three levels: strategic, thematic and governance/facilitation. Monitoring and reporting would be simplified with a clearer differentiation between long-term and short-term goals. Communication (including strategic storytelling) could be centred on ‘missions’ and different levels of implementation, celebrating not only thematic results, but also valuable strategic and political achievements and processes. The transparent impact model streamlines and harmonises monitoring, reporting and work planning, making the work more effective and efficient. Another benefit would be to prevent misunderstandings, including on indicators related to objectives, targets or expected results, at the same time helping to visualise the contributions of each EUSDR stakeholder.

2 Introduction

The Danube Strategy Point (DSP) is the contracting authority of this evaluation that measures the impact of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities. Findings and insights on the nine evaluation questions (EQ) in the Terms of Reference are grouped into four evaluation themes: (A) Implementation, (B) Impact and (C) Communication and a horizontal theme (D) Impact of COVID-19.

Evaluation theme A: Implementation

- EQ2 Are the actions and targets as defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan coherent, realistic, appropriate, and relevant? What should be modified and when (next Action Plan revision)?
- EQ3 How are the Priority Areas proceeding in reaching (or planning to reach) their set targets? What should be changed in order to ensure that the objectives will be achieved?
- EQ7 What tools and processes would be helpful to improve the implementation of the EUSDR? How practicable and efficient will the planned monitoring system (based on the current draft of the reporting tool) be for monitoring the progress and achievements of the Strategy?

Evaluation theme B: Impact

- EQ4 What (policy) impact can be expected to be generated by the Strategy?
- EQ5 How does/can the Strategy contribute to wider policy objectives (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals, European Green Deal, Digitalisation, Post-COVID Recovery, EU enlargement process and neighbourhood policy, etc.)?
- EQ6 How efficient is the EUSDR embedding process in terms of programming (planning phase)? What role is the Strategy (EUSDR and MRS in general) going (expected) to play in the Partnership Agreements and EU funding programmes 2021-2027?

Evaluation theme C: Communication

- EQ8 Are the measures agreed in the Communication Strategy appropriate for the selected target groups? Do the EUSDR communication measures reach the relevant target groups efficiently?
- EQ9 Which narratives have been successful in promoting the EUSDR on the political level?

Evaluation theme D: Impact of COVID-19

- EQ1 What influence does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the impact of the Strategy? What has changed and what should be adapted for the future (because of COVID-19)?

Each evaluation theme is presented in a separate chapter. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology applied in this study as well its challenges. It briefly explains the Theory of Change (ToC) method and data collection process behind this theory-based impact evaluation.

Chapter 4 offers findings and conclusions on evaluation theme (A) Implementation. It presents the views of the evaluation team and EUSDR stakeholders on the coherence realism, appropriateness and relevance of the Strategy. It also provides conclusions on progress towards targets and an assessment of the tools and processes behind the Strategy implementation. There is a specific focus on the new monitoring system.

Chapter 5 assesses current and potential impacts of the EUSDR in general as well as contributions to overarching EU policies and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is dedicated to the evaluation theme (B) Impact. The potential of the Strategy was analysed from three perspectives; concept, content and impact. There is also a focus on the EUSDR embedding process under this theme.

Chapter 6 analyses a wide range of communication methods used under the Strategy for evaluation theme (C) Communication. The measures are distinguished between the two main EUSDR target groups - internal and external. Single communication measures as well as groups of similar measures such as online tools, publications, events and media have been analysed. The most successful EUSDR narratives have been sought. Given the distinct character of this evaluation theme, recommendations are integrated directly into the chapter.

Chapter 7 is the last analytical chapter of the report and describes impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EUSDR. Analysis concentrates on EUSDR implementation, including communication, and impact. Analysis of the COVID-19 impact has emerged into a stand-alone evaluation theme (D) during preparation of this study.

Chapter 8 offers five recommendations. More detailed recommendations for specific aspects of the EUSDR implementation, impact and communication are integrated in the relevant chapters.

The draft final report has nine annexes. These contain information that supports the findings and conclusions. Some information in the interim report has been removed to create a more concise document. Annexes I to IV belong to Chapter 3 on methodology. Annexes V to VII provide an overview of tools and processes behind the Strategy. Annexes VIII and IX are auxiliary tools used by the evaluators to establish EUSDR impact pathways, defining existing and potential impacts as well as verifying the Theory of Change.

Annex I	List of documentation
Annex II	Online survey questionnaire
Annex III	Online survey process and responses to the open questions
Annex IV	Interviewees
Annex V	Interactions between key EUSDR stakeholder categories
Annex VI	Key changes in governance and processes
Annex VII	Remarks on the first draft of the monitoring tool
Annex VIII	EUSDR impact pathways by PAs
Annex IX	Analysis of PA impact pathways

3 Methodological approach

A macro-regional strategy (MRS) provides an added value to the national development strategies and any preceding cross-border and transnational co-operation efforts. It creates an unprecedented potential to deal with common regional challenges in the geographic area. An MRS also contributes to wider EU policy goals such as climate change mitigation and sustainable development.

The EUSDR implementation started in 2010 and the process is intangible and complex. The Strategy encourages continuous and long-term policy change and development. Little time has passed since the revised Action Plan was adopted in April 2020, so it has been challenging to assess the impact of this update in such a short time, i.e., April 2020 to November 2021 (or for a few aspects up to February 2022). Any achievements from the revisions may not yet be explicit. Hence, the evaluation is mainly 'theory-based' on expected links between projects, processes, outcomes and impacts. It is also not always possible to separate the EUSDR implementation in 2020 and 2021 from the wider context of previous achievements or from external factors.

The potential of the Strategy as reinforced by its update and current tools were assessed for possible future impacts. The research questions had a theoretical connotation, i.e., 'could the Strategy tools and processes work to produce the desired change?' A major part of the evaluation involved looking into the planned implementation processes and tools, assessing their appropriateness to induce the desired change as well as how far they have progressed.

The evaluation approach followed scientific criteria and quality standards. It was based on expert judgements building on evidence from desk research, observations, interviews and surveys as well as stakeholder opinions. Triangulation of information sources and data analysis methods helped assess the different forms of evidence and to combine them in the conclusions.

This chapter describes the methodological approach for this evaluation, presenting analytical tools such as the Theory of Change model and the impact pathways. These tools have enabled the multiple EUSDR implementation processes to be evaluated under a single framework using common criteria.

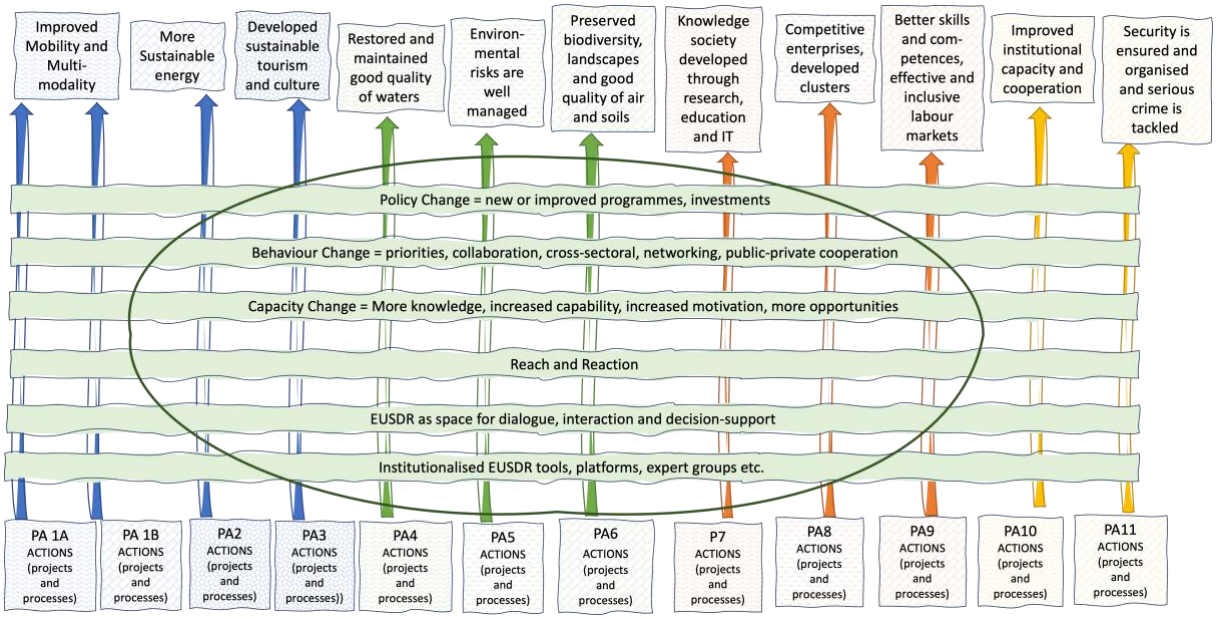
3.1 Theory-based evaluation approach

This theory-based evaluation builds on the complex intervention logic of the EUSDR and its recent alignments, namely the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. By updating, streamlining and making the plan more compatible with EU-funded programmes, EUSDR stakeholders have reinforced the Strategy to achieve change. The theory-based evaluation approach focuses on this envisaged change and tries identifying and, where possible, also assessing the processes behind it.

As a first step, the EUSDR intervention logic or Theory of Change has been reconstructed and examined to analyse implementation relating to the evaluation questions as well as the expected impact under evaluation themes (A) and (B) of this research. There is a visual representation of the intervention logic for the EUSDR as a whole and its various impact pathways for each PA. Figure 3-1 shows the EUSDR T and the intermediate steps producing an expected impact. It is the evaluators' vision of the overall change that can be expected as an ultimate result of the work by every PA individually as well as in

cooperation to achieve greater synergies. Recreation of this vision was necessary to be able to apply the ToC approach for this theory-based evaluation.

Figure 3-1 The EUSDR 2020 Theory of Change

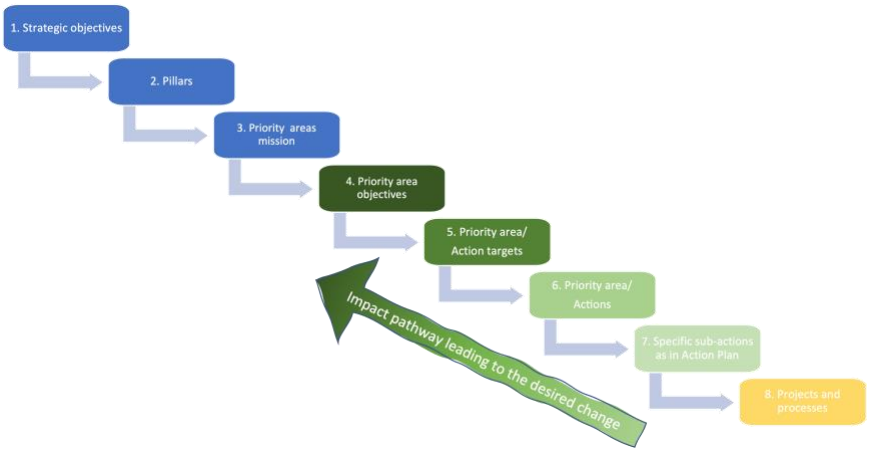


Source: Own elaboration based on EUSDR Action Plan 2020

The Theory of Change and resultant impact pathways for each thematic field are the main methodological tools to examine and evaluate a) relationships between actions and objectives, the coherence and relevance of PAs, and b) the plausibility and probability of impacts expected from the EUSDR actions. These evaluation tools help to open up the 'black box' of how actions contribute to impacts and changes in policy and the territory.

A brief Theory of Change for each PA maps the hierarchy of the strategic elements such as actions, targets and objectives and establishes causal links or impact pathways. Please see Figure 2-2. The actions, targets and objectives are from the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 Part II 'Actions'. All PAs have defined actions and objectives in the document, while not all PAs have defined targets and some have 'targeted actions'. To fill in the gaps in ToC the evaluators also reviewed targets in the EUSDR Consolidated Input Document 2019. The impact pathways of all 12 PAs are enclosed in Annex VIII 'EUSDR impact pathways'. This analytical tool enabled the evaluators to make a detailed assessment of the intervention logic behind the revised Action Plan 2020 verifying or disproving the ToC as well as progress towards the envisaged change.

Figure 3-2 The hierarchy of the EUSDR strategic elements analysed



Source: Own elaboration based on EUSDR Action Plan 2020

3.2 Data collection methods

3.2.1 Desk research

While a Theory of Change has been recreated from the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020, the impact assessment is based on a review of more than 80 related documents, the EUSDR website and other online tools. These relate to projects, processes, expected impact, intermediate outcomes and other supporting activities such as communication. A full list of the documents is attached to this report as Annex I. In brief, they can be categorised as:

1. General EUSDR related documents
2. PAC and NC reports to the EC
3. PA Steering Group (SG) Meeting minutes and presentations
4. 'Additional Information' Annexes of the PA project reports for the Danube Transnational Programme (PA DTP reports)
5. Documents related to macro-regional strategy issues, other MRS
6. EUSDR and its PA website documentation
7. Presidencies homepages and information sources
8. High Level Group (HLG) meeting minutes

3.2.2 Online survey

An online survey covered the EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators. It asked EUSDR stakeholders to assess actions and tools used to achieve the Strategy goals. The questions were structured around implementation, impact and communication with additional sections on COVID-19 and the future of the EUSDR. The questions are in Annex II, more information including the process and responses are in Annex III. Altogether 37 valid responses were received, of which 22 were from PACs, 8 from NCs and 7 from 'other actors'. All PAs and 11 countries were represented.

3.2.3 Interviews

There were 12 interviews plus several consultations with DSP Evaluation and Communication Officers for monitoring and communication. A list of the interviewees in Annex IV includes:

1. two National coordinators of countries that held recent EUSDR Presidencies
2. European Commission, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy
3. both EUSDR Pillar Officers
4. five Priority Area Coordinators
5. Interact

3.3 Challenges and limitations of the theory-based evaluation approach

Implementation of a macro-regional strategy takes place in complex policy frameworks and tackles different types or levels of activity. The evaluation of progress and implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 highlights three levels of action and implementation:

- First, macro-regional strategies offer a dedicated place for strategic coordination, political dialogue and the basis of agreements on priorities and targets. Having common objectives and targets agreed by stakeholders at the EU, national and regional levels can be already considered an achievement. In that sense, the EUSDR has a strategic impact and, thus, is implemented at a **strategic level**.

- Second, the EUSDR works towards thematic targets for each PA. Actors at macro-regional level are not the only implementing bodies of thematic actions as they depend on numerous other national, regional and local players in the Danube Region. For **thematic implementation**, EUSDR internal stakeholders (e.g., NCs, PACs, SGs) facilitate cooperation, promote projects and policy-action-processes, embed actions into national/regional policy processes and guide many other activities that also contribute towards the thematic targets. Progress cannot be judged only for EUSDR but also needs to consider wider policy frameworks.

- Third, the EUSDR governance has a specific role in facilitating processes, communication, organisation and capacity-building to enable effective strategic and thematic actions. This **governance** implementation is necessary for work at the strategic and implementation levels. Yet, for the evaluation, analysing the contribution of smooth governance can be challenging to pin down.

The evaluation took account of implementation and progress under all three action lines, however, a structured assessment per action lines was not deemed plausible as there is no clear differentiation. Harmonising the evaluation conclusions along these three action lines has been one of the main challenges of this study.

Another challenge was the relatively early stage of the two main documents in focus of this evaluation, i.e., the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and the EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020. Since the COVID-19 pandemic also affected the implementation of activities, the time covered by this evaluation, i.e., April 2020 to November 2021 and for a few aspects up to February 2022, limits evidence-based judgements on progress, impact and communication efficiency. Information required to answer the evaluation questions is scarce and heterogeneous.

Finally, a challenge was also the abrupt change in the geopolitical context in the last weeks of the evaluation with the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This affected not only the EUSDR Presidency directly which was taken over by Ukraine on 1 November 2021, but also all human and political interactions in Eastern Europe. Most of the data collection and analytical work for this evaluation was completed by late February 2022, so this report only partly reflects the new situation, and the validity of conclusions and recommendations might suffer depending on events in the forthcoming months and years.

4 Evaluation theme A: Implementation

Implementation is a broad evaluation theme encompassing coherence, relevance, appropriateness, realism and progress of the EUSDR as well as implementation tools and processes, including the new monitoring tool. The chapter below provides findings as per the methodology described in Chapter 3.

4.1 EQ 2: Are the actions and targets as defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan coherent, realistic, appropriate and relevant? What should be modified and when (next Action Plan revision)?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

The PA actions and targets as defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 are coherent, relevant, appropriate and realistic. There is strong vertical internal coherence between the actions and targets within each PA with a few minor gaps in some PAs. Horizontal coherence across PAs is less visible, though there are some synergies. The actions and targets are appropriate, i.e., the agreed strategic approach is suitable for the EUSDR goals. The broad and all-encompassing actions and targets in the revised Action Plan 2020 are relevant and realistic for regional stakeholders given their competence and capacities.

Due to major global and regional challenges since the revised EUSDR Action Plan was adopted, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some focus could need revising in a few policy areas. However, due to the complexity of the revision process no immediate modifications are recommended. Instead, an overall 'reality check' or 'due diligence' could be carried out at a certain mid-term point to be potentially defined by the outcomes of the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile more flexible, and horizontal, e.g., cross-PA working formats, could be considered for greater responsiveness to current and future challenges.

Defining 'coherence', 'realism', 'appropriateness' and 'relevance' is a challenging exercise, where viewpoints and understandings of the term may differ due to diverse political priorities and territorial challenges for stakeholders. For this analysis these concepts are defined as described in Table 4-1 and used to assess the 12 PAs.

Table 4-1 Operationalisation of the terms 'coherent', 'appropriate', 'relevant', and 'realistic'

Coherent	There is a clear logic to how actions lead to targets and strategic objectives. Internal coherence of each PA impact pathway is the connection between activities, actions, targets and objectives.
Appropriate	The actions are suitable for the strategic objectives given the resources and the nature of each policy field.
Relevant	The actions and targets respond to the needs, policies and priorities of stakeholders.
Realistic	The actions can achieve PA objectives considering the resources.

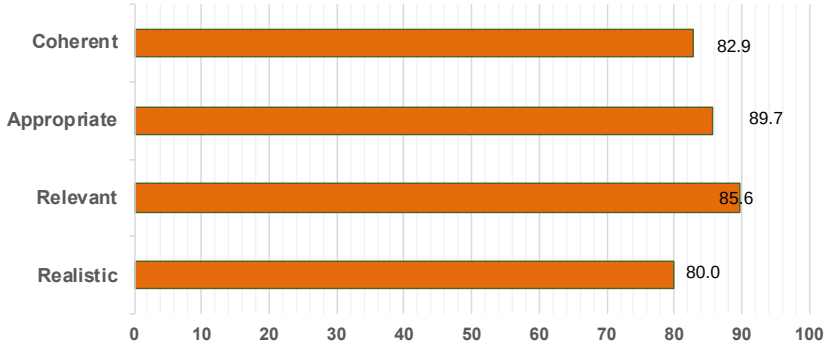
Source: Own elaboration

4.1.1 Outcomes of the online survey

The EUSDR PACs and NCs who took part in the online survey assess coherence, appropriateness, relevance and realism of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 as relatively high. There are no average ratings below 80 out of 100 as shown in Figure 4-1 below.

Figure 4-1 Stakeholder opinion on coherence, appropriateness, relevance and realism (1)

(Q5: In your opinion to what extent are the actions and targets defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 (a) coherent, (b) relevant, (c) appropriate and (d) realistic? (PACs can respond about their respective Priority Area) [0: not at all; 100: fully])



Source: Online survey (n=33-35)

The respondents on average gave coherence 83 points out of 100. However, a few PAC as well as NC respondents rated it 50 or below. Please, see Figure 4-2 next page.

Appropriateness was on average given 86 points, though here again a few respondents assessed it below 50. In general, this shows strong support for the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020, though there are still concerns about the goals and priorities.

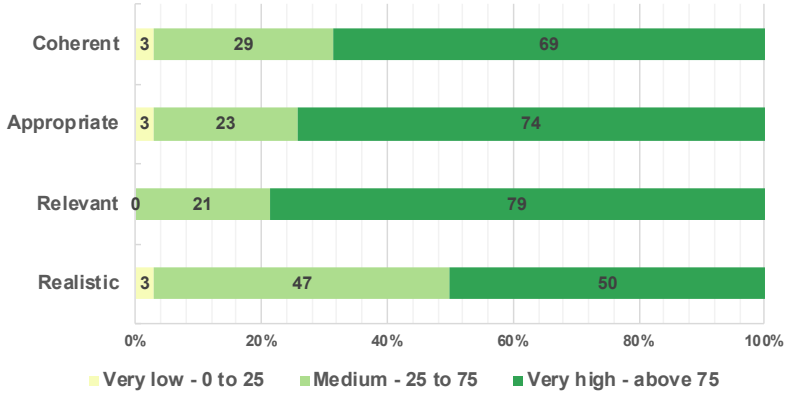
Respondents assessed the relevance of the EUSDR with an average of 90 points. This is the highest rating under EQ 2 and acknowledges that common work is seen to be in line with stakeholder needs, policies and priorities. This suggests that the goals are those the stakeholders signed up for, though fine-tuning should be a continuous process.

The EUSDR stakeholders assessed realism as the lowest of the four qualities with 80 points. The number of respondents who rated it below 50 is almost twice as high as for the other three qualities. The reasons behind this assessment are not known and could be worth investigating. The evaluation team feels that this phenomenon might be related to the heterogeneity of the strategic, thematic and governance action lines, as well as various levels of expectations.

PACs and NCs were also asked their opinion of 'What should be modified and when (next Action Plan revision)?'. Their responses are detailed in Annex III 'Online survey process and responses to the open questions' (see Q28). While some respondents do not see a need for change, others propose slight modifications within the PAs (e.g., more youth involvement) or major changes due to recent developments (e.g., for PA 2 on energy). One respondent even proposes a new thematic priority for the circular economy. Some respondents suggest strengthening horizontal issues and topics within the existing PAs and a more cross-PA way to address topics. Finally, some respondents think it is too early to propose or make any changes.

Figure 4-2 Stakeholder opinion on coherence, appropriateness, relevance and realism (2)

(Q5: In your opinion to what extent are the actions and targets defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 (a) coherent, (b) relevant, (c) appropriate and (d) realistic? (PACs can respond about their respective Priority Area) [0: not at all; 100: fully])



Source: Online survey (n=33-35)

4.1.2 Outcomes of the expert analysis complemented by the interview insights

4.1.2.1 Coherence

All 86 identified impact pathways for the PA actions have been assessed for their perceived coherence and strength. The actions and targets of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 are seen as internally coherent. While most impact pathways are strong, a few are moderate. For more details, please, see Annex VIII 'EUSDR impact pathways'.

There is a clear logic to how actions are leading to targets and strategic objectives. The impact pathways for most PAs show strong vertical coherence between actions, targets and objectives, showing the internal rationale. There are some synergies already between PAs, highlighting horizontal coherence in the EUSDR. Other synergies are noted in working documents, e.g., SG meeting minutes.

The conclusion on coherence of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 is limited by strategic, thematic and governance action and implementation as described in chapter 3.3. Presently, many PA objectives are thematic, while actions are partly strategic or governance based being aligned to the MRS capacities. This leads to a situation where:

- PA targets, linking actions to objectives in impact pathways, are difficult to set and have not yet been formulated at all for PA 3, PA 4, PA 7 and partly PA 11. PA 6 has defined milestones instead of targets for most of its impact pathways.

- approaches for target setting range from mere 'output indicator' targets, e.g., 'one meeting per year' to ambitious goals, e.g. 'To halve the number of fatal and serious road traffic injuries from 2020 to 2030'.

EXAMPLES OF THEMATIC PA OBJECTIVES

- 'Facilitate improvement of secondary and tertiary roads in the region' (PA 1B)
- 'Contribute to protecting water resources and safeguarding drinking water supply' (PA 4)
- 'Promoting the rule of law and fight corruption' (PA 11)

EXAMPLES OF PA STRATEGIC OR GOVERNANCE ACTIONS

- 'To encourage exchange of information and best practices to improve cooperation, create synergies and to initiate joint projects with other macro-regional initiatives and relevant stakeholders at European and global level' (PA 2)
- 'Strengthen disaster prevention and preparedness among governmental and non-governmental organisations' (PA 5)
- 'To strengthen cooperation among universities, research organisations and SMEs in the region' (PA 7)

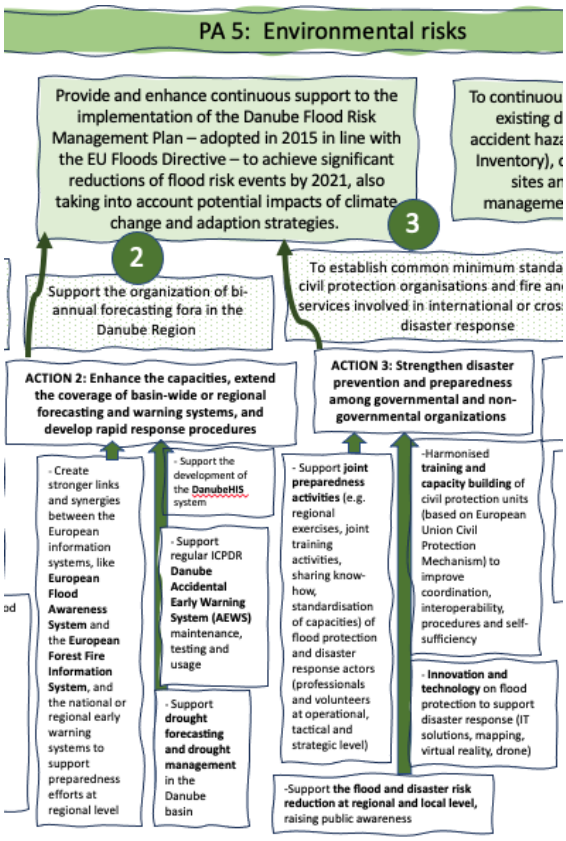
The actions and targets in most PAs cover diverse and complex thematic objectives. Most of these goals cannot be directly achieved by PAs alone but need contributions from many autonomous stakeholders and projects. For example, for PA 7 'to strengthen cooperation among universities, research organisations and SMEs in the region, researchers and university administrations need to work together. The EUSDR core stakeholders, such as the PACs, NCs or SGs, can only initiate contacts and support cooperation, but are dependent on research organisations to make contact and engage in common projects.

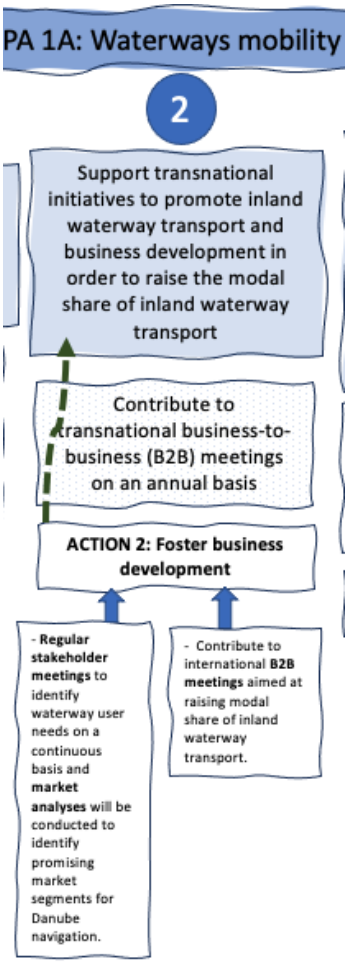
Most impact pathways of the PAs have been assessed as strong while a few are moderate with less coherent causal links between actions, targets and objectives. The next page lists examples of a strong impact pathway and a moderate impact pathway. All 86 impact pathways for the 12 PAs are detailed in Annex VIII 'EUSDR impact pathways'.

A STRONG IMPACT PATHWAY

PA 5: Actions 2 and 3 are seen as appropriate and coherent towards the PA objective 'Provide and enhance continuous support to the implementation of the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan to achieve significant reductions of flood risk events by 2021'.

On the right is an extract from the PA 5 impact pathway as assessed by the evaluators.





A MODERATE IMPACT PATHWAY

PA 1A: Action 2 'Foster business development'. An impact pathway between the action and the target 'Contribute to transnational business-to-business (B2B) meetings on an annual basis' is assessed as moderate by enabling change towards a much more ambitious PA objective 'Support transnational initiatives to promote inland waterway transport and business development in order to raise the modal share of inland waterway transport'. The target is more of an output indicator* than striving to make a change and is weaker than most other targets in the same PA. The specific impact pathway, promotion of business development, is seemingly underestimated for achieving the PA objectives.

*'output indicator' means an indicator to measure the specific deliverables of the intervention (Common Provision Regulation 2021-2027; 2021/1060)

The evaluators assess the horizontal coherence of the EUSDR, its rational to split of some thematic policy areas into PAs, as less obvious and less suitable for overall strategy and individual PA objectives. One example is a split of the complex policy for transport into PA 1A and PA 1B. Keeping inland waterways separate from other transport modes might be justified by the stakeholders, with different ministerial competences and existing networks as well as the opportunity to devote additional resources to this broad field of transport. However, in the evaluators' opinion this risks insufficient integration of transport modes and achieving change, i.e., shift in the modal share. One option could be to reinvigorate collaboration by establishing a cross-PA task force to jointly focus on the modal shift.

There may be overlaps, but synergies between PAs are valuable and challenges can be tackled from different angles. However, the analysis of impact pathways shows it is not always clear whether addressing the same topics is built on synergies or is a (less efficient) overlap.

4.1.2.2 Appropriateness

Obviously, it has been a challenge for many PAs to frame their rationale into their competence and capacities when defining the intervention logic. As a result, many anticipated changes are too broad and ambitious for the PA actions alone. Nevertheless, the actions and targets are appropriate as the strategic approach appears to be suitable for EUSDR goals. It also leaves PAs with a degree of flexibility to respond to current EU policies and new challenges as well as to define more targeted roadmaps, work plans, working group topics, etc.

The revised Action Plan 2020 has adjusted the actions to make them more suitable for the strategic objectives. The present rationale is now more appropriate with an inbuilt potential for greater integration and coordination between the PAs in the opinions of evaluation experts and some interviewees. The revised Action Plan 2020 provides also a few platforms for increased thematic synergies enabling horizontal cooperation. Following a statement made in an interview the evaluators agree that taking account of the available means and nature of different policy fields is a very positive outcome of the revision process. Greater integration and coordination enable the PA SG members to overcome the boundaries of their respective line ministries, which is a strategic goal for improved EUSDR governance.

EXAMPLES OF GREATER COHERENCE (AMONG PAs) AND APPROPRIATENESS

- Eight measures are being implemented jointly between PA 1A and PA 11. They concern simplification, harmonisation, and digitisation of border control procedures for smooth transportation on the Danube River between countries
- Extended horizontal cooperation being sought between PA 1B and PA 11
- 'Network Empowering Roma' of PA 9 together with PA 10

4.1.2.3 Relevance

The evaluation experts conclude that actions and targets are generally relevant for all parties potentially interested in the EUSDR outcomes. There is a tendency for actions, targets and objectives to be broad and all-encompassing, so they are inevitably relevant for a wide range of stakeholders. As already said

in the preceding sub-chapter this is positive as it provides PAs flexibility to adapt to the everchanging environments in their thematic areas. It allows the Strategy to be a living document.

The specifics of MRS define a few circles or levels of EUSDR stakeholders in general as well as specific stakeholders for each PA. In most cases when speaking about the EUSDR stakeholders the intermediaries or multipliers (often also across several levels) representing the ultimate beneficiaries of the Strategy – the general public and businesses are meant. This is also shown by the stakeholder mapping exercise carried out by the DSP together with the PACs and their teams[1].

The EUSDR is relevant for intermediaries or multipliers as PA stakeholders. It is not always obvious how relevant the EUSDR is for the ultimate beneficiaries in some thematic areas. For example, in PA 1A the ultimate users of its outcomes and results are businesses which are expected to use the inland waterways. The decreasing volume of cargo transported by inland waterway[2] in some of the Region's countries shows a possible loss of business traction or relevance[3]. Reconsidering the PA rationale and reinforcing some of its impact pathways could be a way forward. Ideally there would be more synergies with other PAs, such as PA 1B and PA 8 for business-related actions and topics.

Due to the scope and nature of the actions, the evaluators conclude that the Strategy stays within the closer circles of stakeholders including (at least formally) the general public. Failing to review and, if necessary, revise its appropriateness and relevance could result in a silo effect for certain PAs and the EUSDR in general as well as further loss of commitment. This was already flagged by the EUSDR Operational evaluation in 2019.

4.1.2.4 Realism

The evaluation team concludes that overall, the actions and targets of the revised Action Plan 2020 are realistic given the competence and capacities of the EUSDR stakeholders. Also, the interviews highlight that the Action Plan 2020 is more realistic than its predecessor. It is more aligned with Multiannual Financial Framework policy objectives and cooperation between EU and non-EU countries (EU Enlargement Policy Provisions (IPA) and EU Neighbourhood Policy Provisions). Although some EU policies such as the European Green Deal gained momentum after the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 came into force, it is flexible enough to adjust to overarching EU policies. Parts of the EUSDR also fit with the temporary Recovery and Resilience Facility (RFF) provisions as well as the UN SDGs. Please see chapter 5 for the EUSDR impact.

Most PA objectives and targets match the capacities of key players. In some instances, however, the PA change may be too ambitious given the actions and potential impact of EUSDR stakeholders (e.g., PA 1A 'to raise the modal share of inland waterway transport' or PA 1B 'to halve the number of fatal and serious road traffic injuries from 2020 to 2030'). In other instances, the PAs have been more realistic, but cautious in defining the expected long-term change in figures or words. On one hand, this weakens

[1] 'Needs Assessment on cooperation between Priority Areas and relevant stakeholders' provided by the DSP, 2022

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Inland_waterway_transport_statistics

[3] European Court of Auditors, 2015, Inland Waterway Transport in Europe: No significant improvements in modal share and navigability conditions since 2001

the rationale of the Action Plan 2020, but it adds flexibility and gives more leeway to stakeholders to define targeted activities in other formats (roadmaps, work plans, working groups, task forces, etc.).

To conclude on 'coherence', 'appropriateness', 'relevance' and 'realism' of the revised Action Plan 2020 there are a few insights:

- No immediate or medium-term major modifications are recommended. Instead, an overall 'reality check' or 'due diligence' could be carried out at a certain mid-term point. This could be a type of mid-term evaluation or stock-take of the outcomes of the launch of the new revised Action Plan 2020 and an assessment of implications by external factor implications. The new monitoring system could identify the status-quo.

- At the same time the focus and topicality of the thematic objectives should be regularly revisited. Adjustments can be made at operational level using flexible working formats such as roadmaps, work programmes, working groups, task forces, etc. A more flexible approach allows better reaction to gaps, ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of the EUSDR is maintained throughout implementation.

- To increase the relevance and visibility of the horizontal frames requires strengthening and aligning them further within the EUSDR. First and foremost, climate change and sustainable development demand continuous attention across the PAs. Digitalisation and smart specialisation should be also followed-up by exploiting synergies between PAs working with knowledge, innovation, skills and thematic application of digital tools. The COVID-19 pandemic has already kicked many cooperation activities into the digital space and this should be retained. The war in Ukraine is already reinforcing migration, requiring much more coordination and a structured approach.

- To strengthen the horizontal frames, greater cross-PA cooperation and integration should be considered. The current EUSDR rationale is well structured vertically and governance entities function well within PAs, actions and targets. To better address the horizontal frames needs much more horizontal integration. Nevertheless, a more systematic approach could integrate the horizontal frames into the Strategy rationale by inducing new synergies especially between thematically more 'distant' areas.

4.2 EQ 3: How are the Priority Areas proceeding in reaching (or planning to reach) their set targets? What should be changed in order to ensure that the objectives will be achieved?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

All PAs report progress on activities under the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. As flexible as they are most targets and objectives will be achieved. This is also due to PAs reorienting and adjusting to the new targets while still developing their input to the Action Plan revision that started in 2018.

Progress is gradual and can be assessed as satisfactory considering that implementation has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic stopped some activities in the

first half of 2020, most PAs managed to continue, such as SG meetings. In some SGs the number of participants even increased due to the digital format.

Assessing implementation progress has been challenging for most of the PAs due to:

- the very early implementation stage of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020,
- the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and slowdown of activities in 2020 and 2021,
- a slowdown of some activities due to the funding gap between the two programming periods, i.e., 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, the priority to work on new programmes for 2021-2027 and to ensure the EUSDR priorities are embedded in ERDF/ESF programmes, as well as recovery and resilience plans,
- some PAs do not have targets in the Action Plan to assess,
- very limited publicly available information for April 2020 to November 2021.

When establishing the impact pathways and assessing their strengths, an appropriate reference against which the level of the PA progress could be measured was sought for each PA. Various milestones as defined in the PA targets in the revised EUSDR Action Plan served the purpose. These milestones, however, are only rarely intermediary, i.e., fully or partly coinciding with the timeline of this evaluation. Evidence of progress towards these milestones was sought in PA activities since the launch of the revised Action Plan 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak played an important role in the progress of all PAs. As a result of the first restrictions, many planned on-site activities had to be cancelled or modified to be virtual. This has been an optimal back-up solution to continue actions to some degree, however, it is sub-optimal as elaborated in chapter 7. The shift to virtual space ensured continuity of the actions, though sometimes taking a slightly different scope than envisaged. The interviews highlighted that while activities requiring physical participation decreased, there were slightly more participants in the virtual meetings, e.g., SG meetings.

The evaluation experts used a wide variety of sources to judge how PAs resumed their activities under the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and adjusted them to the pandemic, including PA websites, reports to the EC[4] and DTP reports 2020[5]. The latest minutes of PA SG meetings were especially valuable as they contained the most recent updates. Recognising the limited information for the timeline in focus led to additional interviews with the two EUSDR Pillar Officers and some PAs.

Given the COVID-19 circumstances and limited information on PA activities post-2020, the PAs seem to be progressing well. Review of the documentation as well as information from the interviews with the Presidency and PA representatives suggests that during the pandemic it took some months to identify new digital tools for collaboration across borders. As a result, some SG meetings were postponed, or there was one less PA meeting in 2020. However, all PA activities have continued much as originally planned, though with more digital modes of implementation.

[4] *Questionnaire for MRS Thematic (Priority) Area Coordinators* for the 3rd report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

[5] 'Additional Information' Annexes of the PA project reports for the Danube Transnational Programme

PAC input under the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 started in 2018 and PACs were slowly reorienting their activities already before 2020. The structured and consistent manner of PA implementation and the tools in place prior to 2020 enabled a relatively smooth uptake and continuation of PA activities. There has been progress in many areas, especially intermediate steps and enabling conditions that are the basis for policy and behaviour changes. This suggests that actions continued successfully under the new EUSDR Action Plan.

EVIDENCE from PA DTP 3rd period reports (January to June 2021) on events and meetings

- PA 2: 'During the 2nd half of the year, the work of PA2 was unfortunately still hindered by the pandemic. Events and travel were cancelled, postponed or organised online'.
- PA 5: 'Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions prevented the PA5 coordination to attend and organize in-person events in most cases. However, the online platforms ensured continuity in the management of PA5, also a hybrid-style Disaster Management Working Group meeting was possible to hold.'
- PA 9: 'Majority of project meetings were organised online, while some events and some of the project activities had to be postponed. Also, the reach of the target groups and networking with relevant stakeholders is lower due to the restrictions in travel and public meetings.'
- PA 11: 'Ministerial conference planned for 2020 had to be cancelled'.

Even if the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak halted some activities in the first half of 2020 most PAs managed to hold at least some of their governance activities, such as SG meetings. Since the pandemic arrived in Europe in March 2020, there was often sufficient time to shift the SG meetings scheduled for May (e.g., PA 4, PA 5) and June 2020 (e.g., PA 7, PA 8, PA 9) online. Yet, interviewees suggested a short slow-down in activities while the new working modes were established and while individuals got used to working from home. A few planned events could not take place. For example, the interview with PA 10 revealed that 'due to the COVID 19 crises, all five National Participation Days planned for 2020 had to be cancelled'. However, the overall impact of COVID-19 pandemic to the progress of the actions towards the targets remains to be seen.

For some PAs planned strategic activities, e.g., studies or policy recommendations are being published.

EVIDENCE from various sources on strategic documents

- In June 2021 PA 1A drafted the Discussion paper 'Policy recommendation on fleet modernization'
- Youth Participation and Council activities of PA 10 from the PA 10 website
- PA 5 SG meeting minutes provide a very good overview of activities. There is also a concise work plan with an overview of what can be expected in 2022 including a study, a policy paper, training, field exercises, etc.

With a few exceptions most expected activities were implemented by the end of 2021. The fall of 2021 was intense with many activities compensating for restrictions between early 2020 and mid-2021 when the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 was rolled out. The PAs are continuing to work towards their

targets, often in modified / hybrid ways. As most of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 targets are realistic and in line with EUSDR stakeholder capacity they should be achievable.

It would, however, be good to have a 'COVID-19 reality check' at some point and possibly consider, if any alterations would be necessary because of the pandemic outbreak or other factors that have had an impact on progress. This could be a type of mid-term evaluation or stock-take of the outcomes of the revised Action Plan 2020. The new monitoring system could help, as already mentioned for EQ2 in the previous sub-chapter.

4.3 EQ 7: What tools and processes would be helpful to improve the implementation of the EUSDR? How practicable and efficient will the planned monitoring system (based on the current draft of the PAC reporting tool) be for monitoring the progress and achievements of the Strategy?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

The dynamic changes in the EUSDR governance structure, exacerbated in the last four years, and the development of the new monitoring system have addressed the existing needs. The EUSDR stakeholders are mostly satisfied with the implementation. They are confident that the current tools and processes are working well, and the governance structure is efficient. The work of the Danube Strategy Point provides efficient support to the strategy.

The evaluation established that there is no demand for new tools or processes but rather for a more efficient use of the existing frameworks. The Strategy has undergone substantial changes and a joint understanding of its functioning has been developed. Presently little appetite exists for the development of new tools or processes from the side of the EUSDR stakeholders. Given the take-up of horizontal goals, clearer assignment of responsibilities in the existing governance structure or in new roles may benefit. At the same time PACs wish to have increased access to human resources as well as spaces for more creative engagement between PACs and NCs. It is also clear that despite well written documentation for tasks and governance descriptions, stakeholders may reflect differently on the competences of different stakeholder groups.

The idea of a monitoring system that makes reporting easier is widely seen as a good development. The new monitoring system makes use of DTP reporting and enables coordinated submissions to the EC MRS implementation report. The length of the monitoring survey remains a concern.

Macro-regional strategies are examples of evolutionary governance systems. Since the birth of the EUSDR idea the governance structure has remained broad with thematic cooperation in 12 Priority Areas. While these elements have remained the same, the EUSDR working modes have changed over the last decade in a trial-and-error approach, accommodating the changing needs of the region. As a result, there is a wide array of stakeholders and processes, which differ significantly between PAs. This chapter, together with Annexes V, VI and VII provides an overview on the complex multi-actor and multi-level systems in the Danube Region. It also outlines key changes in tools and processes and evaluates

how this is perceived by stakeholders as well as what new tools or processes are needed. The evaluation team analysed:

- changes in the development of tools and processes,
- interactions between stakeholders, facilitating an understanding of the processes and tools,
- confidence in the existing tools and processes and
- the proposed monitoring tool.

The EUSDR governance has obviously been fine-tuned since the start and the changes have been largely advantageous. The DSP was a key change to the functioning of the Strategy and the interviews revealed that the active support and coordination of the DSP is much appreciated by stakeholders. A suggestion was to keep administrative procedures simple and limiting monitoring activities to a few necessary topics, another was for fewer consultations.

Despite the many documents outlining procedures, assigning competences and describing roles, views on implementation differ. The evaluation team thus as a first step created a summary of 'Key changes in governance and processes' which is in Annex VI. It then added an analytical dimension by outlining the processes and interactions between stakeholder groups, which is in Annex V.

The DSP proposed a new monitoring tool, which was reviewed by the evaluation team, and a joint meeting took place in September 2021. A summary of the recommendations of the evaluation team, as well as the responses by the DSP are in Annex VII 'Remarks on the first draft of the monitoring tool'.

4.3.1 Tools and processes

4.3.1.1 Summary of the key changes in tools and processes

A key to the EUSDR implementation is the efficient use of the governance architecture and smooth processes. Since the launch of the Strategy, macro-regional stakeholders have continued to develop their professional and institutional cooperation. Processes, modes of working as well as rules of procedures have been established, reviewed and changed. A key document summarising state of the art governance and the procedures is the 'Governance Architecture' paper that was prepared and endorsed under the Croatian Presidency in 2020.

Since its early days, there have been considerable changes to the EUSDR governance, many of which accelerated in 2018 to 2020. These key changes have been analysed and summarised in Annex V 'Key changes in governance and processes'. Specific attention has been paid to changes since development of the revised Action Plan started in 2018.

The revised Action Plan 2020 introduced new horizontal goals, but these have not been matched by changes to the EUSDR governance. There could, for example, be coordinators for these horizontal goals. However, this was not raised as a concern in the survey or the interviews, or brought to the attention of the evaluators. The evaluation experts feel that without adequate representation in the governance structure, contributing to these overarching goals in a more strategic manner may remain a challenge for the EUSDR. Identifying responsibilities within the existing governance structure or creating a new element in the structure may help target contributions.

4.3.1.2 Interactions between EUSDR stakeholders and allocated time

In general, the interviews confirmed that the roles of key stakeholders match the formal description in the 'Governance Architecture' paper, however, interviewees gave contradictory statements as to who has which tasks.

Analysis of the interactions between individual stakeholder groups highlights that many interactions between EUSDR stakeholders are informative as detailed in Annex V 'Interactions between the key EUSDR stakeholder categories'. Apart from taskforces and workshops, there are no other routine co-creative or joint strategy development interactions between stakeholders. The DSP is the key interlocutor between stakeholders, specifically collecting information, drafting reports and forwarding information to other stakeholder groups. In some interviews, it was noted that more direct contact could be fruitful. The limited number of interviews made it impossible to establish whether this opinion is shared more broadly.

Building on the different interactions and coordination activities, the EUSDR stakeholders were asked about the time they spend to assess resources in different activities. Please see Tables 4-2 and 4-3.

Table 4-2 Hours per task per week PACs

(Q8: How much time in hours do you spend on the following activities in average in a week?)

	None	1-2h	3-5h	5-8h	8-12h	>16h
Coordination within the bilateral /trilateral PAC team	0	8	6	3	1	2
Coordination within the national PAC team	0	5	3	6	2	2
Coordination with other PACs	3	11	2	2	0	1
Coordination with the DSP	0	15	0	3	0	0
Coordination with your NC	1	12	5	0	2	0
Coordination with NCs	9	7	2	0	1	0
Internal ministerial coordination	4	6	3	4	1	0
Coordination with other national stakeholders	2	7	5	2	1	1
Coordination with other stakeholders	1	10	4	2	0	2
Preparing Monitoring and Documentation activities	1	4	5	4	1	2
Attendance of conferences	0	7	7	0	3	2
Coordination with existing Projects	2	9	3	0	2	3
Coordination with prospective projects	2	8	6	1	1	1
Other EUSDR activities	2	7	6	1	1	1

Source: Online survey (n=18-20)

The time allocation by PACs and NCs reveals that for most respondents their tasks require between 1-2 to 3-5 hours. Not surprisingly, for PACs coordination with bilateral/trilateral PAC teams, and within the national PAC team account for most of the working week. In addition, some PACs suggest that coordination activities with stakeholders, and projects or prospective projects take on average 8-12 or more hours.

The questionnaire also suggests that in contrast to other activities, direct contact between NCs and PACs is surprisingly limited given the key function of these two groups of stakeholders. It is less than 2 hours per week with NCs in general, and for 12 respondents time for coordination with 'your' NC remains limited to 1-2 hours per week. The interviews confirmed there is little direct contact between the PACs and NCs considering their key function in the EUSDR. Much of this limited communication is channelled through the DSP.

Substantial time is spent on internal communication and coordination, as well as interactions with projects. Defining how efficient these different coordination activities are would need further information from stakeholders, as the interactions differ by country, PA and stakeholder.

Table 4-3 Hours per task per week NCs

(Q8: How much time in hours do you spend on the following activities in average in a week?)

	None	1-2h	3-5h	5-8h	8-12h	>16h
Coordination within the bilateral /trilateral PAC team	3	2	0	1	0	0
Coordination within the national PAC team	2	2	2	0	0	0
Coordination with other PACs	5	0	1	0	0	0
Coordination with the DSP	0	3	1	1	1	0
Coordination with your NC	0	0	2	0	1	1
Coordination with NCs	0	2	1	1	2	0
Internal ministerial coordination	1	1	1	1	1	1
Coordination with other national stakeholders	0	3	0	0	2	1
Coordination with other stakeholders	1	2	1	2	0	0
Preparing Monitoring and Documentation activities	2	2	1	1	0	0
Attendance of conferences	1	0	2	1	1	0
Coordination with existing Projects	2	1	1	0	1	0
Coordination with prospective projects	1	4	0	0	1	0
Other EUSDR activities	0	4	1	0	1	0

Source: Online survey (n=6)

4.3.1.3 Confidence with existing processes and tools

To establish the extent that PACs and NCs are confident with the existing processes and tools, questions 6 and 7 in the online survey inquired about the resources and processes deemed useful to implement the EUSDR. As these resources and processes largely coincide with the EUSDR internal communication tools as per the Communication Strategy and the Communication Guide, they are analysed in more detail under the evaluation theme on communication. Please see chapter 6.1.1 and Table 6-1 Efficiency of the communication measures. The key resources and processes are:

- core meetings of PACs ranked #1 with 91 points
- NC platform ranked #2 with 87 points
- ad hoc meetings/workshops with EUSDR core stakeholders ranked #3 with 83 points
- the joint PAC and NC meetings ranked #4 with 82 points.

These results are not surprising given that these platforms are key to ensuring communication among the EUSDR implementers. However, meetings with EUSDR Task Force groups is 5th, suggesting that these groups are also important. Not all PAs have established Task Forces or Working Groups, so the time spent for these activities differs between stakeholder groups.

The importance of ad-hoc meetings highlights the flexibility that stakeholders require to react to contemporary topics and opportunities. In addition, stakeholders regularly engage between the biannual SG meetings. It remains unclear how much these meetings are used to coordinate across PAs and Pillars or relate to PAC coordination. Other activities may encompass Working Group meetings as introduced in PA 8 and PA 1A. The interviews suggested that some PACs wish for specific support in setting up Task Force and Working Groups or managing homepages. Some PACs may have less

resources than others to support the development of Task Forces, Ad-hoc groups, Working Groups, or even keep information on the homepages up to date. More targeted support may be needed.

A certain dissatisfaction was expressed in the interviews about the lack of time for more creative, visionary and strategic discussions rather than administrative, structured NC-PAC meetings. The Annual Forums may wish to consider allowing time to respond to this need.

In addition to the established implementation tools and resources, the online survey (Q7) revealed that importance is also given to:

- *regular stakeholder platforms*
- *networks of Managing Authorities*
- *cross-macro-regional networks and cooperation with Interact/ Interact capacity building*
- *mailing list of SG and steering group meetings*
- *consultation with European Commission representatives*
- *horizontal meetings among PAs*
- *Steering Group meetings of own and other PAs as well as PA working groups*
- *consultations with EC representatives*
- *joint meetings with strategic projects in the priority area (back-to-back or side events)*
- *Western Balkan Steering Platform*
- *communication through homepages, social media and newsletter*
- *TRIO MRS Presidencies*
- *National Annual Reports (in some countries presented in Parliament)*

4.3.1.4 Steering Group Meetings

SG meetings are key to implementation of the Strategy, both for strategic coordination of the EUSDR as well as the link to national thematic stakeholders. The interviews highlighted that the stakeholders consider regular participation of all Member States in SG meetings of utmost importance. It was noted, however by some PAs, that participation in many SG meetings is not satisfactory. Others, such as PA 11, made the experience that participation rate in the on-line environment stabilised at a high level. Likewise, the turnover of SG members continues to be a matter of concern hindering working relationships. This remains a well-known weak point of the EUSDR. In response to this continued challenge, the DSP has launched the 'Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups' published in 2020, revisiting participation as well as the procedures and factors influencing participation in Steering Groups. The report confirms three types of membership, that are reported in procedures:

1) members with voting rights, nominated by EUSDR participating states (NCs)
2) observers with no voting rights, regularly participating in SG meetings
3) invited members and/or guests with an advisory capacity.

SG meetings are due twice a year, which in most PAs is happening. As seen in Table 4-4 all PAs continued meeting throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicates the importance of SG meetings. Most PAs maintained two annual SG meetings.

Table 4-4 Overview table of SG meetings since 2015

PA	2015 /2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
1A	2	3	2	2	1	2
1B	4	2	2	2	3	2
2	4	2	2	2	2	2
3	4	2	2	2	2	2
4	4	2	2	2	2	2
5	3	2	2	2	2	2
6	4	1	2	1	1	4
7	4	2	2	2	2	2
8	4	1	2	1	2	1
9	4	2	2	2	2	2
10	4	2	2	2	2*	2
11	3	2	2	2	1	2

* Two more *Extended Steering Group Online Meetings* on dedicated topics.

Source: Own elaboration based on EUSDR SG Needs assessment 2020, the EUSDR webpage events[6] and including the PA meetings scheduled for the week of 12th December 2021, and information provided by the DSP

According to the DSP Pillar Officer, PA 6 introduced a new concept for their SG meetings, basing them on specific topics from July 2021 onwards, similarly to PA 10. The meetings were dedicated to sturgeon, landscapes, soils and ecological connectivity.

Finally, the online survey respondents suggest that proactive coordination, PA-cross cutting strategic storylines and closer cooperation with relevant EU bodies are needed. They also note the EC's role to achieve broader impact at the European level as well as to strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of the EUSDR. In addition, effective links to different policy making levels were mentioned by several stakeholders as needing to be worked on in the future.

4.3.2 Existing monitoring activities and the new monitoring system.

Monitoring and evaluation in the Danube Region are covered by different processes and reporting structures that complement each other. The three main ones are the biennial EC MRS Implementation Report, PAC Reporting to the DTP and the ESPON MRS.ESPON platform. Please see Table 4-5 below.

[6] EUSDR online calendar events: https://danube-region.eu/communication/past-events/

Table 4-5 Existing EUSDR monitoring tools and reporting mechanisms

Monitoring tool or reporting mechanism	Description
EC MRS Implementation Report	The European Commission presents a biennial report outlining the state of implementation of all four EU macro-regions, which is coordinated by the Directorate General for Urban and Regional Policy. The third reiteration covers mid-2018 to mid-2020. This report is accompanied by a Staff Working Document [SWD (2020) 186] that outlines achievements in the different MRS Priority Areas. PACs provide inputs to the report. Previously PACs reported directly to the EC. From 2022 onwards this can be through the new online reporting tool facilitated by the DSP.
Reporting of PACs to DTP	PAC reporting to the DTP is twice a year as part of the project structure, providing substantial information on PAC activities. This reporting complies with the programme structure and is primarily aimed at identifying PAC activities.
ESPON MRS. ESPON	The MRS.ESPON Monitoring tool was developed independently by ESPON, with the four macro-regions providing steering and advice. The goal is to allow stakeholders and the wider public to monitor: - territorial trends and structures - macro-regional objectives - MRS activities and contributions to changes in the macro-regions.

Source: Own elaboration

Several processes are used to assess the MRS progress and activities initiated by PACs. In addition to regular activities, the DSP also organised consultation on specific topics, such as needs assessments of SGs. Yet, until now there has been no structured monitoring tool for the EUSDR progress and achievements enabling an overview of developments over time. The existing procedures and processes were deemed by the NCs to not allow for a monitoring of all topics relevant to identify the impacts and achievements of the EUSDR, and thus they mandated the DSP to develop a new monitoring system[7]. The DSP prepared a new monitoring concept, which was endorsed by the NCs in February 2022. The beta version[8] of the tool was shared with PACs for their feedback, and summarised in the draft template 'Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas'. The new monitoring concept aims at bringing together existing processes and information as well as expanding to topics that were missing.

The new monitoring concept includes new reporting to be introduced from 2022, to be filled in by PACs every other year. The monitoring survey timing should match with the EC MRS Implementation Report and incorporate the Questionnaire for MRS Thematic (Priority) Area Coordinators. It should also include sections ('Additional Information Annex') of the Project Progress Report that have so far been filled in by DTP. Answers from PACs as part of their DTP reporting in the 'Additional Information File' will be pre-filled in the new monitoring tool by the DSP. The idea is to minimise reporting, and for the DSP to distribute the results to the EC. The tool combines different reporting modes in an online platform, where PACs can insert their answers and download a pdf of their responses.

[7] The need for a new monitoring concept was defined in the EUSDR NC Meeting of September 2017 in Budapest.

[8] https://danube-region.eu/test-umfrage/

The monitoring system has an initial suggestion of a total of 52 questions in nine sections:

1. Main achievements
2. Specific horizontal and cross-cutting activities
3. Capitalisation
4. Funding
5. Cooperation with EUSDR main stakeholders
6. Steering Groups
7. Involvement and Cooperation with other Stakeholders
8. Policy development
9. Opportunities and challenges.

Since the initial conversation between the evaluation team and DSP in September 2021 and submission of the interim report, the monitoring system has already been revised based on feedback from the PACs and the evaluation team.

A summary of the comments in the first draft questionnaire, and how DSP has taken these comments up is provided in Annex VII 'Remarks on the first draft of the monitoring tool'. In view of the evaluation question on 'How practicable and efficient is the planned monitoring system?', the updated version seems to provide a good balance between requesting additional information, supporting PACs in submitting information to existing reporting mechanisms, as well as helping to sort the tasks proposed by NCs. After the first implementation in 2022, additional changes will continue till at least 2024.

The MRS.ESPON platform can be a useful tool to offer an overview of territorial development in the Danube Region. In the longer run this will show the impact of EUSDR activities. However, currently ESPON EGTC is deciding whether to continue the platform. Offering support to ESPON in keeping the platform updated and sending (e.g., biannual) data sources or statistics, may help to keep it in place. It remains to be seen how often the territorial monitoring tool will be updated, and whether indicators will be revised in cooperation with the PACs.

5 Evaluation theme B: Impact

This chapter provides insights on possible future (policy) impacts from the Strategy and the efficiency of the EUSDR embedding process for 2021-2027. This evaluation theme covers also embedding to reinforce the Strategy's potential to generate substantial impact.

5.1 EQ 4: What (policy) impact can be expected to be generated by the Strategy?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

The assessment of the expected impact shows that important effects can be expected along the impact pathway for all PAs, namely in the form of capacity change (e.g., increased capacities, more knowledge), behaviour change (e.g., new priorities, collaboration schemes, networking) or policy change (e.g., new or changed programmes, investment decisions). Although macro-regional strategy alone cannot produce substantial impact, it can contribute to desirable changes with enabling factors, such as collaboration, communication, capacities, and generation of knowledge to influence changes in policies and decision-making. The impact generated by the EUSDR can be expected in all policy fields covered by the Strategy, and affects especially environmental policies, external policy and, as well as regional development. For even more impact, an unexploited potential for all PAs could contribute to relevant horizontal and strategic objectives has been identified, using more integrated approaches (cross-PA cooperation) to solve problems or prepare transformation.

Impacts are a long-term perspective of desirable change that result from complex multi-actor and multi-level policy systems in the Danube region. A wide array of policy impact can be expected from the Strategy implementation, though the EUSDR can only influence intermediate changes and improve the enabling conditions.

Annex IX ‘Analysis of PA impact pathways’ offers an overview of the expected ESUDR impact. The table lists significant expected effects according to the evaluation team and is entirely based on the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. However, the Action Plan itself might have phrased it differently and might contain additional topics and more detailed descriptions of expected impacts.

The impact pathways show more specific expected outcomes at thematic and strategic levels for each PA, as assessed in this evaluation. The judgements of the evaluation team are based on analysis of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020, in addition to the review of activity information available in documents, websites, etc. for the PAs in 2020 and 2021. For the assessment two criteria were important:

1. can outcome and impact be realistically achieved given the available means and resources?
2. is the Theory of Change behind the PA robust and credible?

The analysis of the assessments per PA was then carried out under three different perspectives:

a) concept - how impact is understood and described?
b) content - what impact in different thematic fields can be expected?
c) achievement - what is the progress of PAs to achieving impact?

The findings for each type of analysis are presented below.

5.1.1 Analysis of concept

All PAs base their activity on a sound and robust intervention logic that should lead to the expected impact in the long-term. All PAs have valid Theories of Change. Actions are sometimes understood as thematic action lines, or as overarching objectives. Some PA targets are understood as objectives for the thematic action, other PAs have goals for their processes and projects. While some are more traceable, others miss links to demonstrate the full expected change, from project to impact. Some conclusions can be drawn for all PAs.

- The description of PA action could be more understandable for all stakeholders and help avoid confusion if the specific (limited) role of EUSDR implementation contributing to long-term change, as well as other external factors (e.g., economic situation, peace and conditions for global trade etc.), are included in PA missions, objectives, actions and targets[9]. Some PAs do this already and make EUSDR implementation more transparent. They formulate EUSDR actions such as 'contributing to increasing capacities', 'improving interaction, networking and cooperation', 'increased knowledge to take coordinated decisions in the Danube Region'. Alternatively, there are similar intermediate objectives that contribute to missions such as good water quality, a knowledge society or Danube as a safe place to live. PA 9 is a good example of realistic and adequate formulations of objectives and actions, even if the mission statement is vague and describes an action as an aim. For some PAs the difference between the mission and the objective of the PA action is well understood and clearly visible. These PAs highlight that they contribute to 'cooperation among institutions' and 'support to policy development' to facilitate their mission. Other important roles relate to 'communication and awareness-raising', 'coordination of stakeholders and governance levels', 'networking', 'exchange of ideas, experiences and best available practices'. All PAs should reflect on their facilitating role in their description of objectives, targets and actions. This would make the description of objectives and targets for this specific role more concrete and help with monitoring progress for each PA.

- The PAs seem to have a vast unexploited potential to contribute to horizontal and strategic objectives. Apart from some specific action fields in specific PAs[10], the Theories of Change in all PAs do not show how projects and processes can make a substantial contribution to address climate change or deploy more sustainable patterns of development. The same applies to the other horizontal challenges, e.g., digital transformations or those related to ageing, demographic change and shrinking population in specific areas. Some projects and processes address these horizontal issues, but there is no obvious systemic approach such as guidance for all PAs on how to address climate change or climate-proof criteria for all EUSDR projects and processes. The current structure of objectives, targets and actions does not neatly link to the horizontal and overarching challenges. A solution could be to include 'climate tracking' or 'digital tagging' in all EUSDR actions or for projects and processes in certain PAs, so the contribution to horizontal challenges is more visible and

[9] As explained earlier, this evaluation is largely based on a review of documents and publicly available information on EUSDR implementation. There may be internal documents or oral communication in PAs that consider this limited role but these could not be reviewed by the evaluation team.

[10] E.g., climate change is addressed horizontally under PA 2, in an action under PA 5 and indirectly under PA 6.

tangible. Initial measures have been taken to ensure impactful implementation and contributions to horizontal topics and strategic objectives[11], but more actions might be necessary.

5.1.2 Analysis of content

The assessment of the expected impact defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 shows that the post 2020 interventions fit well into the PAs defined in 2010. This is positive, but it also implies a lock-in effect and a strong dependency on the path chosen in 2010 for each PA. The world has changed since then and new topics and challenges have emerged. Some reflections on the expected EUSDR impact as defined in the Action Plan 2020 are:

- The PA structure has reinforced the sectoral fragmentation of topics and challenges, while many of today's challenges require an integrated approach to solve problems or prepare transformation. An example is the transformation to more sustainable energy generation. This topic is addressed under PA 2, but could be addressed also by other PAs, for example, PA 7 and PA 8 creating significant synergies with greater and broader impact.

- In the last two years, the EU funding has changed a lot. New programmes for 2021-2027, new and updated centrally managed EU instruments, Next Generation EU and national recovery and resilience plans have new priorities for a quick economic and social recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare better for the twin green and digital transitions. All this has changed the context for the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 but has not yet been fully integrated.

- Important topics such as digitalisation, sustainable development and climate change are mentioned in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 as horizontal frameworks. However, the paradigm shift to transition to a more sustainable economy and society is not visible in the Action Plan[12]. Integrating the principles of the EU Green Deal into the revised Action Plan would mean, for example, that PA 2, PA 5 and PA 6 would be more overarching Priority Areas, and a high priority put on equal configuration of digitalisation issues for all PAs. Crucial topics such as EU missions[13] like climate-neutral and smart cities, water and ocean quality, healthy soils, adaptation to climate change, e-governance, the social economy and long-term territorial governance are only considered in some actions in some PAs in the revsed EUSDR Action Plan 2020 but these will surely play an important role in the future.

- For a territorial perspective, some PAs highlight in the survey the need to work especially in border territories and cross-border areas, which is seen as positive. However, few PAs adopt a territorially differentiated view of their expected impact. People in rural and border areas of the region will have quite different needs from those in urban regions, and diverse solutions will be needed for different territories. Population and target groups in rural or in peripheral areas usually also receive less

[11] For example, a PAC Workshop in January 2021, organised by the DSP: https://danube-region.eu/danube-events/eusdr-pac-workshop-prerequisites-for-successful-eusdr-implementation/

[12] For a detailed analysis see also chapter 5.2.5.

[13] https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/missions-horizon-europe_en

attention and support from public policies given the lack of critical mass to offer efficient support. This is similar for all Danube countries.

All these aspects can be improved by small changes. They do not necessarily lead to a reduced impact, but probably by at least some of the expected impact could be increased.

5.1.3 Analysis of achievement

It is difficult to make a general assessment of the impact of the EUSDR or of each PA towards their missions and objectives. Obviously, long-term objectives require more time. They also require the systemic impact of many different actors and stakeholders including outside the EUSDR actions. The lack of quantitative objectives also makes it difficult to assess whether targets are realistic, the timeframe is adequate, or progress is satisfactory.

Macro-regional action needs to be understood as complex, requiring multi-governance and mission-oriented policy to tackle wider societal challenges[14]. A thorough impact assessment cannot be based on indicator monitoring and requires alternative approaches with adequate resources and time. Evaluations of mission-oriented policies can focus on an 'ongoing and reflexive evaluation of whether a system is moving in direction of mission via achievement of intermediate milestones.'[15] The focus should be 'on the portfolio of policies and interventions, and their interaction'.[16]

In this context, the analysis offers an idea of EUSDR progress towards impact. The aim is to assess the ESUDR as a portfolio of policies and interventions and the potential to contribute to the missions. Additionally, the potential contribution of each PA to other missions has been analysed. This is not necessarily foreseen by the EUSDR but is deemed important to increase the effect of the EUSDR given the external factors.

Table 5-1 Assessment of EUSDR progress towards impact

Mission	Moving in the direction of the PA mission?	Contributing to other EUSDR missions?
Improved mobility and multimodality – on inland waterways	⊕	⊕
Improved mobility and multimodality – for rail, road and air transport	⊕	⊖
More sustainable energy	⊕	⊖
Culture and sustainable tourism in the Danube Region	⊕	⊖

[14] For more information see: Mazzucato, M. (2018): Mission-oriented innovation policies: challenges and opportunities, Industrial and Corporate Change, Volume 27, Issue 5, October 2018, pages 803–815, https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dty034 as well as Wittmann, F. et al (2020): Developing a Typology for Mission-Oriented Innovation Policies. Fraunhofer ISI Discussion Papers Innovation Systems and Policy Analysis No. 64. https://www.isi.fraunhofer.de/content/dam/isi/dokumente/cci/innovation-systems-policy-analysis/2020/discussionpaper_64_2020.pdf [accessed 6 October 2021].

[15] UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2020): Alternative policy evaluation frameworks and tools. Exploratory study. BEIS Research Paper Number 2020/044. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/sites/public-purpose/files/iipp-beis-alternative_policy_evaluation_frameworks_and_tools_oct_2020_final.pdf [accessed 6 October 2021]

[16] Ibidem

Mission	Moving in the direction of the PA mission?	Contributing to other EUSDR missions?
Good quality water restored or maintained	⊕	⊕
Well-managed environmental risks	⊕	⊕
Preserved biodiversity, good soil quality, less air pollution	⊕	⊕
Knowledge society	⊕	⊖
Competitive enterprises and active clusters	⊕	⊖
Better skills and competences, effective and inclusive labour markets	⊕	⊖
Strengthened institutional capacities and cooperation	⊕	⊕
Danube Region as a safe and secure place to live, work and travel	⊕	⊕

Note: ⊕ = positive (adequate) and ⊖ = unexploited potential that seems relevant for EUSDR implementation.

Source: own elaboration with expert analysis based on the review of documents and accessible information on PAs.

All PAs show progress towards their missions. More detail of this analysis is of limited use given the short time since the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 was adopted and the COVID-19 pandemic that has widely influenced Action Plan implementation since March 2020. The analysis of cross-referential impacts with other missions shows there is a large potential to exploit more synergies in six PAs, namely 1b, 2, 3, 7, 8 and 9. There are important connections between research, innovation, SMEs, skills and competences with economic sectors such as transport, tourism and culture, that might be better exploited for even greater impact. At the same time, sustainable energy has become, especially with the EU Green Deal, an important cross-cutting field and cornerstone of industrial and SME development, innovation, transport and sustainable tourism. This requires relevant skills, research and innovation. This specific role of sustainable energy in other missions is not yet visible in the revised Action Plan.

5.1.4 Online survey of the EUSDR contribution to impact

The online survey provided important insights into stakeholder estimations of the EUSDR contribution. For the policy/strategic impact, the five categories with the highest expected impact refer to cooperation and integration (including joint agreements) between countries and borders. Please see Table 5-2. This matches the spirit of macro-regional strategies that contribute first and foremost to cooperation and integration. More impact is also expected in categories linked to pre-conditions for effective cooperation and joint policies, for example, cooperative attitudes, cooperation on funding and favourable political will. The stakeholders think that the EUSDR contributes to improved environmental conditions. Less impact is expected on improved socioeconomic conditions, evidence-based investment decisions, capacity in public authorities or resilience against disasters.

Table 5-2 Stakeholder opinion on policy impact of EUSDR
(Q13: Policy impact: to what extent has the EUSDR had a positive impact on the aspects below? [0: no positive impact; 100: strong positive impact])

Categories of policy impact	Average score
Strengthened integration and cooperation with non-EU countries within the Danube region	83
Better cross-border cooperation	82
Higher awareness of macro-regional cooperation	77
Solution of cross-border obstacles	75
Agreements on joint strategic goals and targets	71
Cooperative attitudes in national, regional and local authorities	69
Coordination of national policies and funding	67
Improvement of environmental conditions	66
Political will and discourse open to cooperation and joint solutions	63
Improvement of socioeconomic conditions	59
Capacities in national, regional and local authorities	54
Evidence-based investment decisions	53
Resilience and preparedness for unexpected shocks and disasters	52

Source: Online survey (n=28-32)

The EUSDR particularly contributes to cooperation, integration and the development of joint agreements and solutions between countries and in cross-border areas. This policy impact is relevant across all PAs.

The most thematic impact of the EUSDR is expected in relation to the Danube Region as a safe and secure place to live, work and travel largely corresponding to PA 11 with preserved biodiversity, good soil quality, less air pollution, landscapes corresponding to PA 6.

Table 5-3 Stakeholder opinion on thematic impact of EUSDR
(Q14: Thematic impact: to what extent has the EUSDR had a positive impact on the below aspects? [0: no positive impact; 100: strong positive impact])

Categories of thematic impact	Average score
The Danube Region as a safe and secure place to live, work and travel	79
Preserved biodiversity, good soil quality, less air pollution, landscapes	79
Good quality of waters	78
Well-managed environmental risks	78
Culture and sustainable tourism in the Danube Region	78
Improved mobility and multimodality – for rail, road and air transport	78
Competitive enterprises and active clusters	77
Better skills and competences, effective and inclusive labour markets	76
Strengthened institutional capacities and cooperation	74
The development of a knowledge society	72
Improved mobility and multimodality – on inland waterways	69
More sustainable energy in the Danube Region	69

Source: Online survey (n=26-30)

A relatively high impact is also expected in the PAs related to environment protection and resource quality (PA 4 and PA 5). The least impact is expected on mobility on inland waterways and promotion of sustainable energy. This could signal either certain inconsistencies in the relevance, appropriateness, or realism of these PAs or the existing limitations of the EUSDR to influence national priorities and decisions. It is also possible that the general focus of EU policies in 2020/2021 has considerably turned towards green and sustainable transformation, putting topics such as climate change and biodiversity higher on the agenda than it was before 2020. This might influence also the EUSDR stakeholders, without being yet visible as such in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020.

The thematic impact is rated by stakeholders as lower (average 67 points) compared to the policy/strategic impact (average of 75 points). At the same time the range between the highest and lowest assessment is larger for the latter, meaning that the potential thematic impact is limited but still relevant in all PAs. The highest impact is expected for cooperation of policies between countries and in cross-border areas. These have a greater need for agreements and joint solutions than other national territories. Most thematic impact is expected from improvements in environmental conditions and establishing the Danube Region as a safe and secure place to live, work and travel.

The stakeholders highlighted many additional positive effects, ranging from better access to information and transparency to involvement of local, regional and civil society players. All responses to the open Q15 'What other positive or negative policy impacts of the EUSDR have you observed?' are provided in Annex III 'Online survey process and responses to the open questions'. The only aspect mentioned as negative is the necessary trade-off 'to find the common interest of all 14 regions/countries'.

The stakeholders also proposed ways to possibly increase the EUSDR impact. These relate to better coordination within EUSDR and its visibility, administrative culture, awareness of cooperation and a need for stronger political support, EUSDR implementation and funding, relationship with other MRS and specific support for non-EU members. The proposals are listed in Annex III 'Online survey process and responses to the open questions' Q16.

5.2 EQ 5: How does/can the Strategy contribute to wider policy objectives?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

The EUSDR objectives are largely coherent and aligned with wider policy objectives. For the recovery and resilience objectives, there is less coherence. This is not surprising as the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 could not foresee the pandemic consequences and, thus, could not focus on specific recovery and resilience goals.

A high contribution of the EUSDR to wider policy objectives is expected for EU Cohesion Policy goals, as well as European integration with the EU Enlargement and EU Neighbourhood policies. Some policy goals have arisen since the plan was developed, so the expected contribution to the European Green Deal and Digital Europe is limited, as well as to some recovery and resilience objectives. The expected contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is low, considering the resources for EUSDR

implementation and the changes generated by external factors, such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, socioeconomic disparities, as well as air, water and soil pollution.

This chapter analyses the question of how much the Strategy contributes to wider policy objectives. The analysis dwells on a theory-based assessment focusing on the expected contribution based on the examination of key policy documents, as well as from checking the latest EUSDR governance and PA activities. Secondary documents were also reviewed, including the EC State of implementation report on macro-regional strategies 2020 and other documents describing the EU wider policy objectives. Information from interviews and the survey of key stakeholders has also been considered.

The assessment assumes that the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 has considered many EU policy objectives that existed before 2019, since the Action Plan is a continuity of the previous one, and all stakeholders are familiar with the main EU policy goals that are relevant for macro-regional development. In addition, the elaborating the EUSDR Action Plan 2020 was closely accompanied by the EC ensuring a considerable coherence between the Action Plan and EU policy goals, in particular for regional and cohesion policy. The revised Action Plan 2020 defines wider policy objectives as three 'horizontal frames, relevant for all five strategic objectives and to be implemented in the 12 Priority Areas': (1) digitalisation and (2) migration and demographic change. With regard to the European Green Deal, and the ambitions to make the EU climate-neutral until 2050, it is highly important to further include (3) climate change and sustainable development as horizontal topics, too.'

Coherence with these wider policy objectives is established in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. This hypothesis is essentially confirmed by the 2020 EC State of implementation report. 'The EUSDR Action Plan revision aligns the strategy with the new priorities and challenges of the region and better links the Danube strategy's actions with the new EU priorities like the European Green Deal, SMEs, as well as tourism and cultural heritage.'[17]

However, most descriptions of PA actions lack a clear focus and operational mechanism to plan, monitor or report on contributions to wider policy objectives. It seems that wider policy objectives have been taken into account at a very general level but without specific action towards them in some PAs, for example using the horizontal frames to decide on activities or priorities for action. This is understandable as the situation for other EU policy goals (except Cohesion Policy), for new EU policy goals (decided in or after 2020) and wider international policy goals (e.g., SDGs) was not clear during the elaboration of the Action Plan. Examples of how PAs address wider policy objectives are presented below.

The analysis of each policy field (see the sub-chapters below for more detail) shows that the EUSDR objectives are largely coherent and aligned with wider policy objectives.

Table 5-4 Assessment of contribution of EUSDR to wider policy objectives

Area	Coherence with wider objectives	Observed dimension of contribution
EU Cohesion Policy Objectives	High	High
Recovery and Resilience Objectives	Medium	Medium

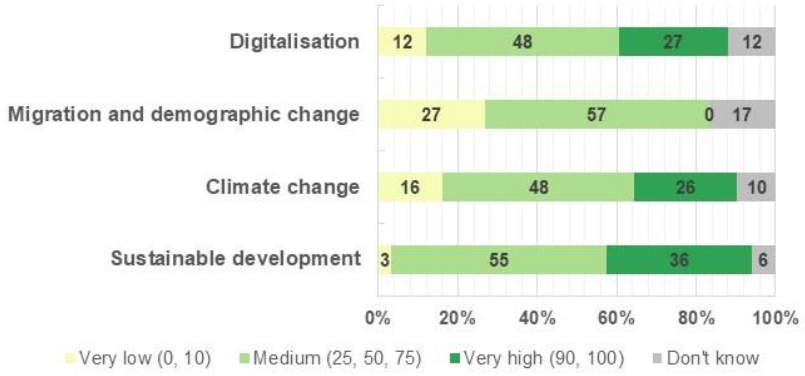
[17] European Commission (2020): Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. COM(2020) 578 final Brussels, 23.9.2020. page 2.

Area	Coherence with wider objectives	Observed dimension of contribution
Sustainable Development Goals	High	Low-Medium
European integration, the EU Enlargement process and neighbourhood	High	High
European Green Deal	High	Medium
Digital Europe	High	Medium

Source: Own elaboration based on expert analysis of documents and accessible information on PAs.

This assessment is partially confirmed by the survey of stakeholders who have different opinions on how activities tackle the EUSDR horizontal topics. While some respondents assess the coherence with wider policy objectives as described in the Action Plan very positively, others assess the actual or potential dimension of the contribution more negatively or neutrally. This offers a fragmented view.

Figure 5-1 Stakeholder views of how EUSDR activities tackle horizontal topics
(Q11: To what extent do the EUSDR activities in your thematic field/country tackle the following horizontal frames? [0: not at all; 100: fully])



Source: Online survey, November 2021 (n=30-33)

It seems that migration and demographic changes are tackled indirectly by the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. Climate change and digitalisation are more present in EUSDR activities but can still have a more prominent and visible role as horizontal objectives. A contribution to sustainable development is expected, but the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 description means this is vague and cannot be easily followed up.

Below are detailed assessments on the Strategy's contribution to different policy objectives.

5.2.1 EU Cohesion Policy Objectives

The EUSDR is one of four EU macro-regional strategies supported and promoted by DG REGIO. Hence, from the outset MRS is aligned and coherent with EU Cohesion Policy goals. The EUSDR Presidencies in 2020 and 2021 included the creation of synergies between EUSDR and EU Cohesion Policy with their political objectives, indicating a strong commitment to EU Cohesion Policy objectives. However, a more detailed analysis was needed because the new 2021-2027 EU Cohesion Policy goals only entered into

force in June 2021 (after the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 was approved), even though earlier versions of the policy objectives were known in 2020.

The assessment of the potential contribution of EUSDR to EU Cohesion Policy goals shows that Danube Region Strategy activities should make a significant contribution to Policy Objectives 1 (smart Europe), 3 (more connected Europe) and 6 (better cooperation governance), a medium contribution to Policy Objectives 5 (Europe closer to citizens) and the horizontal objective of a safer and more secure Europe. Contributions are expected to be relatively low for Policy Objectives 2 (Greener Europe) and 4 (more social Europe), because few actions and PAs contribute to them. The MRS.ESPON monitoring tool also confirms overlaps with Cohesion Policy goals, describing the overlaps between the five goals and the EUSDR Pillars. See the example of Greener Europe here[18].

Table 5-5 Assessment of potential contribution to EU Cohesion Policy Objectives

Policy Objectives	Assessment of contribution	Contributions
1. A more competitive and smarter Europe	**High**	Under PA 7 and PA 8, but also integrated in PA 1A, PA 2, PA 5, PA 9, PA 10 and PA 11.
2. A greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy	Low-Medium	Under PA 2
3. A more connected Europe by enhancing mobility	**High**	Under PA 1A and PA 1B, also considered in PA 2 and PA 7
4. A more social and inclusive Europe	Low-Medium	Under PA 3, PA 9
5. Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories	Medium	Some action under PA 10, can be also relevant under PA 3 and PA 9
6. Better cooperation governance	**High**	All PAs
H: A safer and more secure Europe	Medium	Under PA 11, but also under PA 1A, PA 1B, PA 3, PA 10

Source: Own elaboration based on expert analysis of documents and accessible information on PAs, taking into account how many PAs directly or indirectly address the objectives.

5.2.2 Recovery and Resilience Objectives

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is a centrepiece of NextGenerationEU, a temporary recovery instrument set up in 2020 to help repair economic and social damage brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. RRF is closely aligned with the Commission's priorities ensuring a sustainable and inclusive recovery that promotes the green and digital transitions. It entered into force in February 2021.

In Article 15(3)(cc) the Regulation states that measures included in national recovery and resilience plans can include cross-border, or multi-country projects. For the EC 'such projects are essential for the

[18] https://mrs.espon.eu/ESPON_SPACE/trends/ESPON_SPACE_5/index.html

recovery and to strengthening Europe's resilience and are of a particular relevance for the flagship initiatives; they have the potential to better integrate value chains and deepen the Single Market.'[19]

It has to be noted that the RRF Regulation politically agreed between the European Parliament and the Council in December 2020 (2020/0104 (COD)) did not exist when the EUSDR Action Plan 2020 was approved in April 2020. Equally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for recovery and resilience could not be projected before April 2020. So, an assessment of a potential contribution of the Strategy to the recovery and resilience objectives has to be interpreted carefully.

The global assessment shows that the EUSDR will probably contribute most to the objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, including economic cohesion, jobs, productivity, competitiveness, research, development and innovation. The contribution to sustainable development, social policies and digital transition is limited to a few PAs. There is almost no contribution expected to the resilience and health care capacity objective, which came into focus specifically with the pandemic.

For resilience and recovery objectives, the Strategy has a limited and unevenly distributed contribution according to the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020.

Table 5-6 Assessment of potential contribution to Recovery and Resilience Objectives

General Objectives	Assessment of potential contribution
Contribution to a sustainable and inclusive recovery and promote the green transition, including biodiversity	Medium (PA 2, PA 4, PA 6, partially PA 9)
Contribution to digital transition or the challenges resulting from it	Medium (PA 8 and PA 9, almost all PAs partially)
Contribution to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, including economic cohesion, jobs, productivity, competitiveness, research, development and innovation, and a well-functioning single market with strong SMEs	**High** (PA 1a, PA 1b, PA 3, PA 7, PA 8, PA 9)
Contribution to social and territorial cohesion	Low (partially PA 9)
Contribution to strengthen Europe's health and care systems and institutional resilience and capacity to prepare for and react to crisis, the social resilience in relation to employment	Very low (partially PA 9)
Promotion of policies for the next generation, in particular on early childhood education and care, education and skills, including digital skills, upskilling and reskilling, employment and inter-generational fairness	Medium (PA 9, partially PA 10)

Source: Own elaboration based on expert analysis of documents and accessible information on PAs and taking into account how many PAs directly or indirectly address the objectives.

[19] European Commission (2021): Commission Staff Working Document. Guidance to Member States. Recovery and Resilience Plans. SWD (2021) 12 final. PART 1 of 2. Brussels, 22.1.2021.

5.2.3 Sustainable Development Goals

In 2019, during the public hearings on the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan the stakeholders indicated that the 'revised EUSDR Action Plan of EUSDR should have a clear connection to the Sustainable Development Goals'[20].

The revised Action Plan 2020 has no general reference to the SDGs for the EUSDR as a whole. However, the EUSDR Consolidated Input Document 2019 (p.20) states that 'the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be considered as an overall tool for encountering climate change and enhancing sustainability of the Danube Region.' This general statement translates into some references to the SDGs under PA 4, PA 5, PA 6, PA 7 and PA 9, while a general alignment or analysis of contributions to the SDGs is missing in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020.

An analysis of the objectives, targets and actions of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 shows there is significant potential for positive contributions to the SDGs. This does not seem to be fully recognised or exploited by all PAs, at least according to documentation and references to the SDGs. Overall, the EUSDR shows an indirect contribution potential to SDGs 5 'Gender Equality' and 17 'Partnerships for sustainable development'.

Table 5-7 Potential contribution to SDGs based on the 2020 EUSDR Action Plan

PA	Potential direct positive contribution to SDGs
1A Waterway mobility	Low SDG 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure
1B Rail-Road-Air Mobility	Low SDG 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure
2 Sustainable Energy	**Medium** SDG 7 Affordable and clean energy SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production
3 Culture and Tourism	Low SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production
4 Water Quality	**Medium** SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation
5 Environmental Risks	**Medium** SDG 13 Climate action
6 Biodiversity and landscapes, quality of air and soils	**Medium** SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities SDG 13 Climate action SDG 15 Life on land
7 Knowledge Society (only Action 5)	Low SDG 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure
8 Competitiveness	Low SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth SDG 12 Responsible Consumption and Production
9 People and Skills	**Medium** SDG 4 Quality education SDG 10 Reduced inequalities

[20] EUSDR PA 10 (2019): Report on the Public hearings on the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan. 27th June 2019. https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/EUSDR_ReportPublicHearings_2019.pdf

PA	Potential direct positive contribution to SDGs
10 Institutional Capacity and Cooperation	**Medium** SDG 16 Peace, Justice and strong institutions
11 Security	**Medium** SDG 16 Peace, Justice and strong institutions

Source: Own elaboration based on expert analysis of documents and accessible information on PAs and taking into account how PAs directly or indirectly address the objectives.

It seems there is no active integration or monitoring of the connection between the SDGs with the EUSDR Action Plan. However, there are various positive examples of aligning EUSDR with the SDGs in PA 10 actions. For example, one was the promotion (though not organisation) of the 'Danube Governance Conference: Towards European integration with the SDGs' (January 2021), organised as the final event of the programme Building Administrative Capacities in the Danube Region[21]. Furthermore, in January 2020, PA 10 promoted the OECD programme on a Territorial Approach to the SDGs as a means 'to support cities and municipalities in increasing their capacities and knowledge in order to enhance their performance in view of the SDGs.'[22]

Overall, the conclusion is that a more visible and stronger link between the EUSDR actions and the SDGs would help the stakeholders in the Danube region to better understand the coherence between both policy frameworks and how their own actions fit or might fit into both contexts. A stronger alignment with the SDGs – and communicating this – might increase the understanding and visibility of the potential impact of EUSDR actions for stakeholders who lack an overview of the EUSDR and are more familiar with individual actions or policy fields.

One recommendation is to review EUSDR governance, for example using a simple web-based tool, either at the governance level or within PA Steering Groups. A possible tool could be the free online Learning Tool SDG Impact Assessment[23]. Discussions on using the tool are expected to also strengthen synergies between PAs bringing wider macro-regional missions.

5.2.4 European integration, the EU enlargement process and neighbourhood policy

The EUSDR covers 14 countries: nine EU Member states, three Accession / Western Balkan states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro), as well as two Neighbouring states (Ukraine, Moldova)[24]. The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 states that 'the EU Strategy for the Danube Region has a crucial role in the deepening of EU integration, collaborating with candidate countries, and enhancing cooperation with non-EU neighbours, which has become even more important for Ukraine since 2014.' It is expected that Ukraine and Moldova will change their Neighbouring states status to the Accession candidate status sometime in the future. For the EUSDR it will imply reshuffling the present

[21] https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/2021/01/danube-governance-conference-towards-european-integration-with-the-sdgs/

[22] https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/2020/06/how-does-your-city-perform-in-achieving-the-sdgs/

[23] https://sdgimpactassessmenttool.org/ set up by the Gothenburg Centre for Sustainable Development.

[24] Serbia and Montenegro are officially EU candidate countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate country. All five countries are covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy, with Moldova and Ukraine belonging to the Eastern Partnership and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro to the Western Balkans section.

action balance to meet up these geopolitical challenges. While EU integration overall is a familiar topic in the Danube region, that would result in increased intensity and geographic coverage.

European integration and cooperation between EU Member States and third countries in the Danube region and especially in the cross-border areas are necessary for territorial cohesion and regional development, unlocking the full potential of the macro-region to become and remain a liveable area. As different reports indicate, the EUSDR contribution to European integration with other countries has indeed been important.

The COWI Study (2017) highlights: 'As the other three MRS (EUSBSR, EUSAIR, EUSAIR), the EUSDR has succeeded in bringing together different actors (e.g., private and public, across different government levels, from third countries). Moreover, a key achievement of the EUSDR is the increase in policy dialogue and cooperation on major issues, as well as more cooperation with third countries.'[25]

Before the period covered by this evaluation, the EUSDR Implementation report 2016-2018 highlighted that the 'involvement of pre-accession states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro) and European neighbouring countries (Ukraine, Moldova) has progressed in all cases and national working groups are in place except for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Funding participation of pre-accession states and neighbouring countries remains challenging – Republic of Moldova participation could only be secured via technical assistance from the Austrian Development Coordination.'[26]

The macro-regional activities and increased involvement of candidate and neighbouring countries shows that cooperation and integration have increased significantly, not only due to EUSDR (and EUSAIR in the Western Balkans) but also to IPA/Interreg Cooperation programmes. Of course, it needs to be understood that the EUSDR cannot be the only driver of European integration but can promote dialogue and cooperation in various policy fields, mobilise funding, build capacities and networks and provide new knowledge to tackle societal challenges. The EUSDR is a cornerstone of 'differentiated integration […]. According to this conception, the European integration must not be seen as a uniform or monolithic process (made by multilateral agreements) but rather, as a mosaic one, consisting of individual interrelated elements (such as regional organizations of different levels) with a common base.'[27]

In this context, Interreg and IPA programmes are important. There are also institutions and frameworks that are much older than the EUSDR, such as the Danube Commission, the Carpathian Convention and the Central Europe Initiative. Finally, there are also wider EU policy processes promoted under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) by EEAS[28] and DG NEAR. Two frameworks have to be

[25] COWI et al. (2017): Study on macroregional strategies and their links with cohesion policy. Commissioned by DG REGIO. European Commission.

[26] Danube Strategy Point (2020): EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018. p.42.

[27] Turșie, C. (2015): Macro-regional strategies of European integration. What can the Danube Region learn from the Baltic Sea Region? In: Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 183 (2015) 1 – 10. Page 2.

[28] European External Action Service

highlighted here, the 'Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020'[29] and the 'Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (EIP)'[30].

Desk research shows there is significant coherence between the EIP flagship initiatives and strategic 'flagship' topics of EUSDR to be embedded in Cohesion Policy and IPA programming documents. For example, rail-road-air mobility has strong links with the proposed actions in the EIP chapter on Investing in Sustainable Transport.

Given this wider context and considering that EUSDR is not the only element that contributed to European integration in the Danube Region, the EUSDR contribution can be significant and valuable in two aspects: a) engagement of EU and third country stakeholders (not only at high-political level) in larger policy processes and cooperation projects, b) reducing the barrier to access to EU funding instruments and to EU Cohesion policy instruments.

The EUSDR Presidencies in 2020 and 2021 included cooperation with Western Balkan countries as a political objective, indicating a strong commitment towards European integration. This political will to use the EUSDR to promote integration is perceived as very important and a positive signal for all EUSDR stakeholders. The invasion of Ukraine will raise even more questions on European integration among EUSDR countries.

Integration and good neighbourhood relationships are noted in particular in PA 10 and PA 11. These also define specific actions, projects and processes that build on continuous support for European integration. In other PAs, cooperation with non-EU countries is indirectly a condition but not explicitly described. Notably PA 9 is coordinated jointly by Austria together with Ukraine and Moldova, as another example of MRS integration.

From the evaluator's perspective more action and effort from all stakeholders are possible and needed, as the EUSDR itself reflected in 2020: 'The current involvement on an equal footing of the Western Balkans in the Danube and the Adriatic-Ionian strategies should be further enhanced, including by ensuring their effective participation in implementing the twin green and digital transitions. Authorities from Western Balkan participating countries should allocate sufficient resources to ensure their effective participation in the MRS governance and implementing structures.'[31]

If the analysis looks at existing challenges for integration, including obstacles at the EU external borders with Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries, there is still a strong need for action. Cross-border challenges at external borders are currently not a focus of MRS activities. Cross-border areas play a key role in European integration, as has been highlighted by the Commission document 'EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration'[32] There are already many IPA and Interreg Programmes to support cross-border cooperation. However, financial support and cooperation needs

[29] European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2020): Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for al. JOIN (2020) 7 final.
[30] EU-Western Balkans High-Level Meeting (2021): Brdo Declaration, 6 October 2021. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf
[31] European Commission (2020): Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. COM(2020) 578 final Brussels, 23.9.2020. page 11.
[32] European Commission (2021): EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration. COM(2021) 393 final. Brussels, 14.7.2021.

also to be dedicated to creating stable cross-border governance structures, exploring the need for joint public services, or developing robust cross-border statistics. This is in line with a forthcoming study highlighting that 'the weakness of cross-border governance structures (e.g., Euroregions) identified in many border areas between EU Member States and enlargement countries leads to the obvious consequence of low efficiency and effectiveness of the structure and the inability to jointly develop projects and strategic development initiatives in the targeted cross-border area.'[33]

In this context, the potential of the EUSDR to positively influence development in Danube Region cross-border areas is not fully exploited. Potential support of EUSDR governance and PAs could possibly go more towards:

- facilitating cross-border exchanges
- stronger cross-border coordination of policies
- facilitating the conclusion of a bilateral interstate agreement
- supporting the joint elaboration of cross-border territorial development plans
- supporting the establishment of new cooperation structures.

5.2.5 EU Green Deal and Just Transition

Climate change and environmental degradation are an existential threat to Europe and the world. To overcome these challenges, the European Green Deal should transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy, ensuring no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, economic growth decoupled from resource use and no person and no place left behind. The Green Deal was presented in 2019 by the EC and endorsed by European leaders in December 2020. It will be financed with investments from the NextGenerationEU Recovery Plan and the EU's seven-year budget 2021-2027.

It is widely understood that MRS can be a platform to promote the Green Deal. According to a recent study, the Green Deal will have profound geopolitical repercussions, some of which are likely to adversely impact European Union partners[34]. The same study notes that the EU 'should internationalise the European Green Deal by mobilising the EU budget, the EU recovery fund, and EU development policy.' This also involves MRS to facilitate cooperation with third countries. For example, the relevance of the Green Deal is already highlighted in the 'Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans'.

Counteracting Climate Change is an important horizontal objective of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. Since 2020, the EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies have put environmental protection high on the agenda. For example, in 2020 the Croatian EUSDR Presidency had an important focus on Environmental protection and sustainable economic development. The following Slovak's EUSDR Presidency, considered climate change and the protection of biodiversity also as two key challenges with a wide cross-sectoral overlap. This active commitment of EUSDR Presidencies to environmental

[33] Zillmer, S. et al. (2021): Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries. Report for the European Commission. Final Report October 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/studies/2021/analysis-of-cross-border-obstacles-between-eu-member-states-and-enlargement-countries

[34] Leonard, M. et al. (2021): The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal. Policy Brief by ECFR and Bruegel. February 2021.

protection and climate change as well as the continuity of this thematic focus are assessed as very positive.

The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 highlights important complementarities with the Green Deal considering coordination, cross-sectoral approaches, multi-level governance and stakeholder involvement. The topic and relevant measures are mentioned under several PA actions. These include actions to slow global warming, better adaptation and increased resilience, securing water supply for people and agriculture, coping with more frequent natural hazards, preserving and restoring biodiversity, etc. More concretely actions related to climate change and the transition to an emission free society can be found especially under PA 2 and PA 5, with contributions also in PAs 1A, 1B, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10.

The potential contribution of the EUSDR to Green Deal objectives is high in two areas. First, the EUSDR can add value to activities and investments related to the green transition at national level by facilitating coordination in decision-making and action, cross-sectoral approaches, multi-level governance and stakeholder involvement. Second, the EUSDR plays an important role in transferring Green Deal priorities and objectives to third countries in the Danube Region, in line with the role of EUSDR in European integration.

For future studies it would be interesting to have a more specific follow-up of EUSDR actions that strongly contribute to the Green Deal or to identify good practices where it is effectively supported by EUSDR action.

5.2.6 Digital Europe

In June 2020, the European Council endorsed the Council Conclusions on 'Shaping Europe's Digital Future' that recognised the contribution of digitalisation to economic cohesion, climate neutrality and social inclusion.[35] The EU is to become greener and at the same time more digital according to the EC goal. In addition to support via EU Cohesion Policy and the Single Market Programme, the Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL), launched for the 2021-2027 programme period, is the main instrument to support digital transformation in the EU. DIGITAL is designed to help ensure that digital technologies are reliably available in everyday working life as well as in the private sphere. DIGITAL supports three thematic areas; High Performance Computing, Artificial Intelligence und Cybersecurity, as well as two cross-cutting themes; digital skills and capacities in health systems, SMEs promoted through European Digital Innovation Hubs.

Within the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF, around €7.59 billion is earmarked for the Digital Europe Programme between 2021 and 2027. DIGITAL complements other funding programmes, in particular the European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon Europe, but also the Connecting Europe Facility, which supports the expansion of digital infrastructure. Also, EU Cohesion Policy Funds, as well as the RRF will contribute widely to digital transformation.

[35] European Commission (2020): Shaping Europe's Digital Future

In the Danube Region, the EU is already cooperating with accession countries for a digital future through the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans and with EU Neighbourhood countries via Association Agreements.

Digitalisation is a horizontal objective in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. Digital transformation is a central topic addressed by PA 7 (Knowledge Society), PA 8 (Competitiveness) and PA 9 (People and Skills). In addition, there is high potential for contributions in all other PAs, considering that digital tools, computing and artificial intelligence will be the backbone of future science, industrial and service activities.

Innovations and digital transformation were also a thematic priority under the Slovak Presidency of EUSDR in 2021. On 22 September 2021, the Slovak EUSDR Presidency organised an event on boosting innovation and digitisation in the Danube Region[36]. The 2021 Danube Participation Day, held in October 2021[37], was also dedicated to 'Participation & Digitalisation'. The event itself and several projects that boost digital transformation show the increasing commitment of EUSDR stakeholders which is a positive step on the way to completely integrating the digital transformation in each PA.

The COVID-19 health crisis has accelerated several trends, notably digitalisation and innovation. In a few months, the COVID 19 crisis brought about years of change in the way companies in all sectors and regions do business. Companies worldwide accelerated the digitisation of their internal operations as well as customer and supply chain interactions. This has been also an important driver for change in the EUSDR governance bodies and PAs. The 'new normal' is no more like 2019. Concluding from the desk research, the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 does not fully exploit the potential of all PAs to contribute to the digital transformation. However, it seems that the COVID-19 experience with digital work helped introduce digitalisation and innovation in the work of PA stakeholders exceeding the Action Plan 2020 objectives.

A follow up on digitalisation promoted by the EUSDR and further exploiting synergies between PAs related to knowledge, innovation, skills and thematic application on digital tools is recommended.

5.3 EQ 6: How efficient is the EUSDR embedding process in terms of programming (planning phase)? What role is the Strategy (EUSDR and MRS in general) going (expected) to play in the Partnership Agreements and EU funding programmes 2021-2027?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

Overall, the EUSDR embedding process is assessed as very comprehensive and complete. It has been built on continuous efforts to show the national and regional authorities' ways to align new programmes with the EUSDR and create mechanisms to facilitate appropriate contributions. For more than three years, documents, leaflets, events, websites, surveys, networks and high-level events have been used to promote embedding. Clearly, a lot of effort has been made and early results show embedding has taken place in many countries and many programmes. Compared to the embedding during the 2014-

[36] https://danube-region.eu/eusdr-thematic-conference-on-innovation-and-digitization/

[37] https://danubeparticipationday.eu/events/8th-danube-participation-day/

2020 funding period, where only one third of programmes showed a medium to high degree of correspondence and embeddedness, it seems that for the period 2021-2027, according to the new ERDF/CF Regulation, programmes will have an extensive description of their contribution to the EUSDR (and other MRS and sea basin strategies) and will even have operational mechanisms to strengthen contributions and follow-up during implementation. The conclusion is that the process to support for embedding from the EUSDR has been extensive. Embedding in EU funded programmes depends to a large extent on national and regional authorities and also on the EU regulatory framework. The EUSDR can only play a small role in 'nudging' towards embedding, facilitating exchanges of ideas and experience as well as identifying and explaining possible ways to embed. Taking this into account, the EUSDR embedding process is evaluated as highly useful and efficient. The support to embedding from the DSP is evaluated as effective. Valuable instruments, such as the ERDF/CF MA network and the IPA/NDICI programming authorities' network are now in place to facilitate continuous support for embedding.

Effective and wide-ranging embedding of the EUSDR priorities into national and cooperation programmes is expected to have mutual benefits. This provides the Strategy with the means to achieve objectives, and increases impacts of the programmes through better cooperation and coordination. Embedding also allows beneficiaries of EU funds to better understand the connection between projects, impact processes, policies and objectives and to follow-up on their contribution to the strategic objectives of the MRS. A 2017 study for INTERACT[38] indicates that systematic embedding of the EUSDR (and EUSAIR) is the result of a continuous, comprehensive process, with actions in three dimensions:

- Ensure compliance with the MRS in EU regulations for the funding period (ensured by the legal framework including EU regulations);
- Apply 'synergy-enabling rules' to current EU regulations and associated non-regulatory approaches and tools that support MRS implementation (to be ensured by the legal framework and EU regulations);
- Coordination, cooperation and information exchange by the MRS and individual programmes, as well as programme bodies and national coordinators to ensure more coherent implementation.

Much of the embedding depends on the regulatory framework. However, its effectiveness is also partly determined by the actions of MRS and programme authorities. The same study highlights that 'systematic embedding […] primarily relies upon individual initiatives of EU funding programmes. However, embedding should not be considered a 'one-way street' because the EUSDR and EUSAIR have clear potential to generate benefits at different stages of the programme and project cycle.'[39]

In the context of this evaluation, the analysis of embedding focuses on two questions. First, the assessment of actions carried out and promoted by the EUSDR to stimulate wider and deeper embedding in the 2021-2027 funding period (i.e., at the beginning of the new programme cycle). Second, assessment of the preliminary effectiveness of embedding, referring to the role that the EUSDR and its strategic objectives and instruments play in Partnership Agreements and EU funding programmes 2021-

[38] INTERACT (2017): Embedding macro-regional strategies. Study prepared by INTERACT with Jürgen Pucher and Thomas Stumm.
[39] Ibidem, page 5.

2027 in the Danube Region. Clearly, these points can only be tackled at a very general level by this evaluation, given the limited resources available to respond to many different evaluation questions. Hence, the judgement is mainly based on the analysis of surveys, existing reports and the embedding process itself.

5.3.1 Embedding process: actions by EUSDR 2021-2027 to stimulate embedding

Since 2018, the EUSDR has been working on strengthening the embedding process. This should continue throughout 2021-2027 and expectations are much higher than for the 2014-2020 period. This time, embedding in budgets, programming documents and funding instruments is looked for, exceeding mere thematic alignment, and going beyond cooperation programmes (e.g., Interreg). Following the experience of 2014-2020 and the recommendations of the 2017 Interact study on embedding, the EUSDR has taken a very proactive and guiding role to support national and regional authorities in taking up and integrating the EUSDR objectives and priorities into their programming processes. The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 refers to embedding MRS priorities into funding programmes and instruments. 'The more concretely the EUSDR actions and targets are defined, the easier it will be for the different funding programmes and instruments to embed them into their own objectives, or to define potential for synergies and complementarities.' The text box below summarises the process EUSDR based on information on the EUSDR website[40]:

During the first EUSDR Task Force Embedding meetings in January and February 2020, it became clear that the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 with its 85 actions would be hard to embed. Therefore, in April 2020 PACs and their SGs were asked to compile a **shortlist of up to three strategic topics per PA**, to be included in their national/regional operational programmes. Until the end of July 2020, NCs and core decision makers of the Strategy were screening the suggested topics for their feasibility and suitability for embedding at national level in consultation with the respective Programming/Managing Authorities. The **EUSDR embedding tool, including the shortlist**, is a rolling document which is regularly updated during all phases of the embedding process. In the second meeting of Chairpersons of the National Coordinator groups (Trio Presidencies) of EU MRS and the EC on 17 May 2020, NCs of all four MRS expressed the need for active dialogue with programming authorities to ensure the recognition of MRS priorities / actions in operational programmes.

With the support of EUSDR NCs the DSP and the Interact programme, the Croatian Presidency (2020) established a EUSDR Task Force on Embedding to draft a comprehensive tool, to coordinate implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan with EU priorities as well as the priorities of the involved pre-accession and neighbouring countries for the MFF 2021. Until now, the Embedding Task Force held five meetings.

The 2021 Slovak EUSDR Presidency strongly promoted the embedding process and published a discussion paper[41] that summarised the process and activities carried out so far, outlining potential embedding tools which can be utilised by managing authorities (MA) to incorporate EUSDR objectives into their actions. These tools are:

1. Incorporation of the Danube Strategy objectives expressed as 36 shortlisted topics into Partnership Agreements and operational programmes.

[40] https://danube-region.eu/projects-and-funding/embedding-2021-2027/

[41] Danube Strategy Point (2021): EUSDR EMBEDDING – FROM WORDS TO ACTION! Discussion Paper February 2021.

2. Implementation of synchronised calls.
3. Implementation of activities contributing to EUSDR objectives outside a Member State, including outside the EU, provided the operation contributes to the objective of a particular programme and the EUSDR.
4. National synergy-capitalisation calls to support transnational cooperation projects and EUSDR.
5. Seed Money Facility to fund projects with strategic importance to EUSDR.

Furthermore, the Slovak Presidency invited ERDF/CF managing authorities and IPA/NDICI programming authorities to workshops on embedding the EUSDR into the EU funding Programmes. Different networks with/of authorities responsible for planning and programming have been established. In 2021, three MA networks are fully operational, providing a solid basis for embedding activities and thus another vital pillar for the success of EUSDR implementation:

a) ESF MA network (since 2015)
b) ERDF/CF MA network (established in January 2021)
c) IPA/NDICI programming authorities' network (established in April 2021)

The EUSDR NCs play a key role in the embedding process. They contribute by providing information on the embedding at national level, liaising with programme authorities and having an overview of the relevant programmes. Ideally, NCs are involved in the programming process and could bring in the EUSDR priorities. Reports on the programming process at national level are provided by NCs during the EUSDR Task Force meetings for embedding the EUSDR into EU Programmes (e.g., in June 2021).

In 2021 the DSP conducted surveys among MAs, programming authorities and NCs of the Danube Region on programming processes. Based on these surveys, DSP designed two documents which provide insight into Cohesion Policy Specific Objectives covered by national and Interreg programmes in the Danube Region. It further displays the alignment of programme thematic priorities with the EUSDR actions and shortlisted topics. In October 2021 a consolidated paper[42] elaborated an overview of how to monitor outcomes of the embedding process in the programming and implementation phases. It summarises the potential steps and information sources and highlights the different roles of the EUSDR stakeholders. Additional activities, such as the High-Level-Group Meetings and the MRS week, help to promote the need for embedding and to identify and overcome specific challenges.

Overall, the EUSDR embedding process is assessed as very comprehensive and complete. However, the process has been also challenging from an organisational and efficiency point of view. According to documents describing the embedding process and to interviews, embedding has absorbed many EUSDR governance body resources, in particular DSP and NCs, since 2018. Perseverance and determination to repeat the message and show again and again possible solutions and ways to embed are highly effective and most likely to produce an impact. Possibly, on/off events would have been less resource-intensive and time-consuming but not as effective as an on-going process. Therefore, the time and resources dedicated to embedding are considered as useful and necessary.

[42] DSP (2021): Paper on Monitoring of Embedding the EUSDR into EU Funds and Funding Programmes 2021-2027. October 2021.

5.3.2 Effectiveness of embedding: EUSDR in 2021-2027 programming documents

Effectiveness of the EUSDR embedding process is determined by two variables, the number of programming and other official documents (i.e., Partnership Agreements) that embed and the degree/quality of embeddedness. A high degree of embeddedness would, for example, mean that a programme extensively describes its contributions to the EUSDR, foresees tools to align funding of the programme with the EUSDR priorities. It would also anticipate the integration of EUSDR into operational mechanisms, such as participation, monitoring, evaluation, on-going coordination through regular information exchange, the EUSDR representatives invited to Monitoring Committees, etc.

Effective embedding also depends on national processes and national priorities. A key challenge to embedding is timely information on embedding opportunities of administrative units in charge of ERDF/CF/ESF programming. Requirements linked to alignment with macro-regional strategies are only one of many topics the programming experts need to deal with. There may also be competing interests. Positive examples of advanced embedding, such as the synchronised call for proposals 'Innovation express' (by PA 8) need to also be presented and promoted at national (and regional scale) to show that embedding is possible.

Presently (March 2022), the programming process of 2021-2027 programmes has not yet concluded and it is difficult to assess the two variables based on primary data. However, an early assessment can be based on the EUSDR embedding survey, carried out by the DSP. The results for October 2021 show that many programmes plan at least a thematic alignment with the EUSDR strategic goals. The policy areas with at least high alignment are:

- PO 1: Very high alignment on R&I/S3. High on clusters, female entrepreneurship.
- PO 2: Very high alignment on climate change adaptation and flood/disaster risks, high on energy efficiency, biodiversity and green infrastructure.
- PO 3: High alignment on cross-border and rural transport infrastructure.
- PO 4: High alignment on education /skills/employment, as well as tourism.
- PO 5: High alignment on participatory governance and capacities for local actors.

This indicates that also strategic embedding in funding instruments, and specific objectives might be satisfactory. Responses from interviews and the survey of EUSDR stakeholders confirm that the EUSDR support and coordination for the embedding process has been very effective so far. Key obstacles mentioned in the survey are the existing complexity of rules under Cohesion Policy that complicate adding another layer of cooperation with MRS objectives, a lack of capacity and resources within ERDF Managing Authorities, a lack of knowledge (and successful examples) of how to align and embed at the level of line departments and ERDF MA, a lack of communication (for whatever reason) between EUSDR NC and national ERDF MA. Many of these obstacles can be overcome with more information exchange, cooperation on learning about embedding as well as on-going capacity building activities.

It is clear that effective embedding does not end with the approval of 2021-2027 ERDF national and regional programmes, but rather starts at that point. Effective embedding needs to continue through call management, alignment of funding, capitalisation and mainstreaming of pilot knowledge and joint planning and coordination of activities all through the 2021-2027 period. This will be an on-going task for the EUSDR stakeholders. From the evaluator's point of view, the DSP support to embedding has

been effective. Valuable instruments, such as the ERDF/CF MA network and the IPA/NDICI programming authority network now facilitate continuous support for embedding.

For the future it is recommended to continue the efforts to support and facilitate embedding by the DSP and current and future EUSDR presidencies. The exchange of information and good practices on embedding examples, on methods, tools and results for embedding should continue, to support on-going alignment and mainstreaming of EUSDR objectives in the EU funding programmes. In particular, support to ERDF/CF, IPA/NDICI and ESF networks, information on good practices on embedding (via websites, newsletters, events), as well as specific capacity building events can be effective activities to continue.

6 Evaluation theme C: Communication

As with the two preceding evaluation themes, the analysis of EUSDR communication was also based on the document review, online survey and interviews as mentioned in Chapter 3. The main documents were:

1. EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020,
2. EUSDR Communication Guide 2020 and
3. three annual EUSDR Communication Plans (2019, 2020, 2021).

The implemented communication activities were reviewed based on information provided by the DSP as well as the EUSDR website. Acknowledging that implementation of the EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020 is a responsibility of several categories of stakeholders, including PACs and NCs, evidence of their contribution has also been considered where possible. This was mainly found on PA and NC websites as well as their reports to the EC.

The main timeline in focus of this evaluation is 2021 - a year following adoption of the EUSDR Communication Strategy and the Communication Guide. Most of the communication measures were already used before the endorsement of these two documents, so the evaluators were flexible on the timeline and took account of communication measures developed and used also before 2021. Below is a summary of responses to the two evaluation questions.

6.1 EQ 8: Are the measures agreed in the Communication Strategy appropriate for the selected target groups? Do the EUSDR communication measures reach the relevant target groups efficiently?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

A general proxy to verify the efficiency of EUSDR communication is the increase in citizen awareness of the EUSDR in the latest Flash Eurobarometer 497 published in October 2021. Awareness in the EUSDR Member States rose from 19 to 22%, which means that every fifth resident of the region is aware of the Strategy. The EUSBSR has by far the highest citizen's awareness for an MRS – 39, but the EUSDR communication has had a measurable effect.

The internal communication measures are all highly appreciated by the EUSDR stakeholders verifying their efficiency in reaching the target group. PAC meetings and NC platforms/networks stand out as the most appropriate. Compared to concerns raised in the 2019 EUSDR Operational evaluation the overall satisfaction with internal communication has increased.

The external communication was kick-started by new strategic documents. Most of the communication measures for the two external target groups, namely, 'Institutional / Government' and 'Civil society / Business sector' are appropriate. At the same time the internal heterogeneity of the groups signals that their efficiency can vary greatly depending on their prior knowledge of the EUSDR. Events are considered as the most appropriate and efficient communication measures for both external target groups. The thematic conferences organised by PAs are ranked #1 for both target groups. Appreciation

of in-presence meetings has increased as they were mostly suspended from March 2020 due to the pandemic. The restrictions narrowed the scope of many on-site events, among them also the EUSDR Annual Fora. Publications, especially the success-stories e-brochure, are the next most efficient and appropriate communication measures especially for the 'Institutional / Government' target group.

The EUSDR main website has the highest potential to reach both 'Institutional / Government' and 'Civil society / Business sector' target groups. The PA subsites are relevant communication tools to build the thematic community and strengthen links around PAs. Social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn (also Twitter to a lesser extent) are suitable to reach 'Civil society / Business sector'.

A criterion for selecting the measure for this evaluation was that it has been applied since the EUSDR Communication Strategy came into effect in late 2020. The appropriateness and efficiency should be primarily judged from the outcomes, i.e., actual reach of the target groups. It must be noted that overall, the timeline in focus of the evaluation, i.e., 2021 was very short. Some of the EUSDR communication measures were only recently introduced so it is too early to assess their efficiency and appropriateness from actual outcomes and the results of their implementation, e.g., the EUSDR Intranet and Smart App. This is also true for external communication as the first online media campaign was conducted in mid-2021.

There is insufficient data to justify the appropriateness and efficiency of some more recent communication measures. For external communication the focus on 'efficiency'[43] or the ability to accomplish something with the least amount of time, money and effort or competence has been diverted slightly to 'effectiveness'[44] or the degree something is (potentially) successful in producing a desired result as well as reviewing possible improvements.

At the same time 'efficiency' remained the main focus for internal communication since it requires effort from the EUSDR stakeholders that would be hardly measurable or comparable, by anyone except the stakeholders themselves. It was deemed important to assess if the measures, as adjusted following the EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020, helped reduce the effort required to stay optimally informed and involved in the Strategy implementation.

6.1.1 Internal communication

The internal communication target group are the EUSDR structures: the DSP, SG members, PACs, NCs, DG REGIO, Working Group leaders and members, as well as EUSDR TRIO Presidencies. For internal communication it is not easy and probably not always necessary to distinguish communication measures from workflows, hence, internal communication is mainly processes and tools of implementation which have already been analysed in sub-chapter 4.3 of this report for EQ7.

Evaluation of internal communication measures was solely based on the online survey and the interviews. Survey respondents were asked to assess their efficiency and elaborate on the use of other

[43] 'The extent that resources (inputs) used to produce outputs are used as efficiently as possible (with lowest possible resources/costs)', TOOLKIT for the evaluation of the communication activities, DG Communication, 2017

[44] 'The measurement of the extent to which the outcomes generated by the activities correspond with the objectives', Ibid.

tools to implement the EUSDR. Table 6-1 shows the survey results by measures and their relative ranking. The ranking is solely for perception rather than comparison between the measures since their aims, content, participation, regularity and other characteristics are too varied to be compared directly.

PAC meetings and NC platforms/networks were assessed with the highest scores, 92 and 87 points out of 100 respectively. The scores acknowledge their efficiency and appropriateness as deemed by the EUSDR stakeholders.

Table 6-1 Efficiency of the communication measures

(Q6: To what extent are the below listed resources and processes useful to implement the EUSDR? Please, assess them focusing on those modes of implementation that you directly use or meetings you attend. [0: not useful at all; 100: very useful])

Resources and processes		Average	Rank
Internal discussion group - mailing list for the whole EUSDR governance structure		78,4	*7*
Meetings	General list of the EUSDR stakeholders published on the website	72,7	*11*
	NC meetings	77,1	*8*
	TRIO Presidency meetings	71,8	*13*
	PAC meetings	91,2	*1*
	Joint NC-PAC meetings	81,7	*4*
	Individual meetings with DSP representatives	79,8	*6*
	Meetings with/of different EUSDR Task-Force groups	81,3	*5*
	Other ad hoc meetings/workshops with EUSDR core stakeholders	83,4	*3*
Online tools and platforms	Internal newsletter	72,0	*12*
	EUSDR intranet	76,2	*9*
	Joint online NC/PAC calendar with EUSDR relevant events	75,7	*10*
	National coordination platforms/networks for the EUSDR	86,5	*2*

Source: Online survey (n=28-33)

None of the measures has less than 70 points meaning that all of them are deemed sufficiently appropriate and efficient for the target group. There was no criticism of internal communication in the online survey or the interviews. This is notable following the 2019 EUSDR Operational evaluation which concluded that 'there is still homework to be done related to internal communication'.

6.1.2 External communication

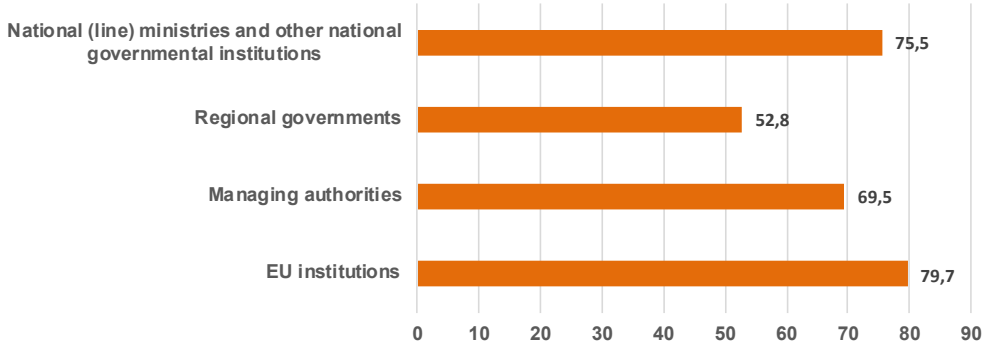
For content, both the EUSDR Communication Strategy and the Communication Guide have a comparatively bigger focus on external communication compared to internal communication. Five of the seven EUSDR Communication Strategy objectives concern the two external communication target groups. Also, the EUSDR Communication Guide provides advice on how the internal communication target group should be communicating to the two external target groups.

Appropriateness of the communication measures for the external target groups is defined by several factors. One of the most important is the prior knowledge of the target group. As a first step a question establishing the knowledge of external target groups and their respective sub-groups of EUSDR was

included in the online survey. See, Figures 6-1 and 6-2 below for the results. It has to be noted that these were PACs and NCs, who were asked to make the assessment not the target groups themselves.

Figure 6-1 The level that subgroups of the target 'Institutional / Government' are informed of the EUSDR as perceived by the stakeholders

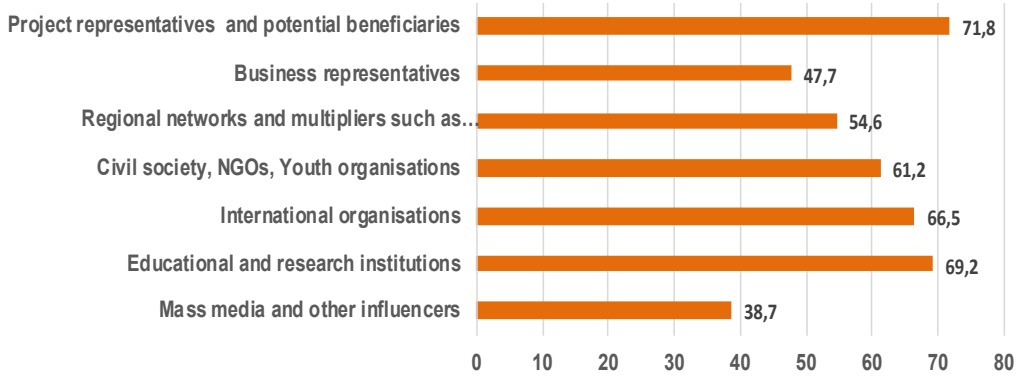
(Q18: Thinking of the target group 'Institutional / Government', how informed and involved in the EUSDR are the following sub-groups? [0: not informed at all; 100: highly involved and committed])



Source: Online survey (n=30-31)

Figure 6-2 The level that subgroups of the target 'Civil society / Business sector' are informed of the EUSDR as perceived by the stakeholders

(Q21: Thinking of the target group 'Civil society / Business sector', how informed and involved in the EUSDR are the following sub-groups? [0: not informed at all; 100: highly involved and committed])



Source: Online survey (n=27-30)

The NCs and PACs perceive the target group 'Institutional / Government' as a whole to be better informed about the EUSDR (69 points on average) than 'Civil society / Business sector' (58 points), however the difference is relatively small. At the same time the difference between subgroups reveals significant heterogeneity within the groups. The scores range from 53 points for 'Regional governments' to 80 points for EU institutions within the target group 'Institutional / Government' and between 39 points for 'Mass media' (and presumably the general public) and 72 for 'Project representatives and potential

beneficiaries' within the 'Civil society / Business sector'[45]. Such differences can impede a common message and require further communication differentiation for the subgroups.

Further assessment of the communication measures for the two external target groups entailed two steps: (1) inquiries with the EUSDR stakeholders via the online survey and (2) expert analysis of how the measures were applied mainly in 2021 and what the outcomes have been. Below Table 6-2 presents the results of the online survey.

Table 6-2 Effectiveness of the following communication measures in reaching the target groups 'Institutional / Government' and 'Civil society / Business sector'

(Q19 & Q22: How effective are the following communication measures in reaching the target group 'Civil society / Business sector'? [0: not effective; 100 very effective])

Communication measures		Institutional Government	Rank	Civil society / Business sector	Rank
Online tools	Main website	81,4	3	78,9	2
	PA websites	73,5	11	68,9	10
	National online platforms	68,9	16	65,3	16
	Facebook page	70,0	14	75,8	4
	LinkedIn page	61,4	19	76,4	3
	Twitter page	58,8	20	69,1	9
	YouTube page	62,8	18	67,1	13
	Smart app	41,0	21	53,3	21
Publications	Newsletters	73,3	12	64,1	18
	Videos	75,6	8	66,3	15
	Success-stories e-brochure	80,4	4	73,9	6
	Success-stories printed brochure	73,0	13	64,5	17
	Other information materials such as fliers, leaflets etc.	70,0	14	60,0	20
Events	EUSDR Annual Forum	78,8	6	63,9	19
	Thematic conferences organised by PAs	87,4	1	79,3	1
	Thematic conferences organised by EC and affiliated	85,4	2	74,8	5
	Thematic conferences organised by Other Networks	79,2	5	70,5	8
	Other events, meetings, conferences	76,2	7	72,2	7
	Travelling exhibitions	65,7	17	66,9	14
Media	Online media campaigns	73,9	10	68,1	12
	Media relations	74,3	9	68,7	11

Source: Online survey (n=27-29)

Below is the summary of the online survey and experts' findings by four types of communication measures: (a) online tools, (b) publications, (c) events and (d) media. The evaluation team is thankful to the DSP Communication Officer who provided the main analytical data. Here again, the comparison between communication measures is not that important as much as their individual assessments by the two target groups. The summary also includes immediate recommendations, whereas more general proposals are listed at the end of this chapter.

[45] Please, note that the inquiry was about the perception of stakeholders towards the target groups. The opinions of the target groups themselves was not envisaged in this study.

6.1.2.1 Online tools

The **EUSDR website** https://danube-region.eu/ has been assessed as one of the most appropriate and effective communication measure to reach both external communication target groups 'Institutional / Government' and 'Civil society / Business sector'**.** It is also a resource hub for Danube Region information and opportunities which can be useful for the Danube cooperation community. Upcoming events and funding opportunities for potential projects are examples of such resources and opportunities.

Google analytics highlights a rapidly growing number of the EUSDR website visitors and page views, i.e., from 10,130 in March 2020 to 18,686 users[46] by end August 2021. This reflects a good start for the EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020 and the media campaign launched via Google Ads in June 2021. The website effectiveness was also acknowledged by respondents to the online survey who deemed it to be a significant tool for external communication, ranking it #2 for the 'Civil society / Business sector' and #3 for 'Institutional / Government' target groups.

In line with the EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020, the website is also a communication measure addressing the internal communication target group. It therefore provides information of interest to much better informed and involved actors which sometimes risks blurring the message for the external audience. Internal meetings under 'Upcoming events' or detailing all communication material are examples of such issues. The future orientation of the website depends on the priority of addressing internal and/or external target groups. If addressing external actors is the priority, then some elements related to 'internal' stakeholders could be given less prominence on the website, or gathered in a section, e.g., 'EUSDR in the making'. Differentiating how the internal and external audiences are addressed (and related messages) would clarify the approach. An efficient intranet could host some internal communication that is currently covered by the main website.

Dedicated PA subsites on the main EUSDR website are also assessed as appropriate and effective for communication. Each PA has a subsite on the main EUSDR website (*theme*.danube-region.eu). It is the responsibility of each PAC (or PAC team) to maintain the information flows on these sites and provide structured information about a PA, its targets, events and major projects. The activity on each subsite varies from one PA to the other. Some PAs use their subsite to highlight key projects through a search engine (e.g., PA 1A). Others use it to build the community by regularly updating the newsfeed (e.g., PA 3, PA5) or an 'Upcoming event' section (e.g., PA4). Overall, PA subsites are seen as relevant communication tools to build a community and strengthen links around them. Their appropriateness largely depends on the specific needs of each PA. Notwithstanding, information should be updated on a regular basis.

No data have been made available for the number of users of PA subsites for the timeline of this evaluation. It can be presumed that the increase in users of the main EUSDR website resulted in increased visits also of the PA subsites. The subsites are deemed to be effective, though their effectiveness could vary slightly between the PAs. The survey respondents assessed their effectiveness

[46] Google Analytics does not report unique users. The 'users' metric includes both new and returning users.

as relatively moderate, ranking them #10 for 'Civil society / Business sector' and #11 for 'Institutional / Government'.

While overall the existence of the EUSDR related **national online platforms** is deemed appropriate and necessary, it is not clear what target groups they reach and how efficiently. Based on the NC questionnaire for the 3rd EC report on the implementation of EU MRS there are EUSDR related national online platforms in national languages in all the EU Member States except Bulgaria. These platforms are usually subsites of the institution the NC represents, so their reach to the EUSDR relevant target groups is unknown. The national online platforms are ranked relatively low also in the online survey, #16 out of 21 measures assessed for both the external target groups.

The main EUSDR **social media accounts**, namely Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are appropriate and efficient. They are daily information dissemination channels for EUSDR news, such as PA activities, calls for projects, project highlights, the Annual Forum and related events in the Danube Region as well as institutional news connected to EUSDR presidencies. These three social media platforms disseminate content to a wider audience. In May 2022, the EUSDR had 7,294 followers on Facebook (FB), 1,307 subscribers on Twitter (TW), and 2,514 connections on LinkedIn (LN). Although there are fewer followers on TW than on FB, the TW algorithm (less selective) and the type of users generate as many impressions/reaches on TW as on FB.

In 2021, there was an additional emphasis on FB activity. The new EUSDR targets of all PAs were promoted on FB through regular posts. The campaign received attention from the community. 12 related FB posts reached on average 500 people each and engaged 43 people, i.e., likes and shares. This was a significantly higher outreach compared to similar posts beyond the campaign.

The EUSDR stakeholders rated the social media platforms as more effective for 'Civil society / Business sector' target group, ranking FB as #4, LN as #3 and TW as #9, while relatively less appropriate for the 'Institutional / Government' target group, ranking FB as #14, LN as #19 and TW as #20 out of 21 measures. This is confirmed by the evaluation experts based on expectations for such sites, especially FB.

The EUSDR YouTube (YT) channel is a good repository for videos produced on behalf of the Strategy, but less appropriate and effective as a communication measure. Created in July 2012 it features 47 videos, of which 31 are less than two years old. On 9 May 2022 the channel had 54 subscribers. PA 10 also has a YouTube channel with 4 subscribers[47]. In the survey, the EUSDR stakeholders ranked YouTube #13 for the 'Civil society / Business sector', while #20 for the 'Institutional / Government' target group. Despite the small number of subscribers, the EUSDR YT channel it is a good repository for existing video material that could be broadcasted otherwise.

Introduction of **the EUSDR SmartApp** is a very new and innovative approach, but it is too early to judge its appropriateness and effectiveness. The Smart App was launched in June 2021 for iOS and Android. It provides information similar to the Danube Strategy website, e.g., general information, news, events

[47] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6uIGFmyS-TckRfuQL84UIA

calendar, calls for projects, etc. Up to 3 November 2021 it had 94 downloads, which can be assessed as a relatively good result for such a novelty.

Although the SmartApp has been designed for the external target group, the evaluation experts feel that the present functionalities and potential reach mean the SmartApp is much handier and more relevant for internal communication. Also, the survey respondents ranked the EUSDR Smart App as the least effective communication measure for the external communication groups, #21 out of 21. At the same time, the SmartApp is a novelty for MRS which should be taken into account, as well as the habits of users.

A few insights regarding the online tools - social platforms are:

- geographic and generation specificities should be addressed, e.g., reaching younger people (18+) requires appropriate social media tools, e.g., TikTok
- tailoring communication messages to specific audiences of the social platforms could generate more engagement from users. This would require fine-tuning the content and accompanying texts based on more profound studies of existing follower profiles
- profiling SmartApp users consistent with the GDPR, e.g., asking them to identify the type of organisation or target (sub)group they belong to, would enable better understanding of the 'client' to conclude the appropriateness of the tool, but also to better adjust its content to specific target groups.

6.1.2.2 Publications

Newsletter is an appropriate communication measure to reach people that have provided their consent for being regularly informed about the Strategy developments. In November 2021, the EUSDR newsletter had 673 subscribers, of which 167 were part of the EUSDR governance. Since June 2019, six newsletters have been sent out ensuring an appropriate regularity - one newsletter each quarter from the 2nd quarter of 2020 to the 4th quarter of 2021. Regularity is key for newsletters even in times of low news intensity.

Also, four PAs have previously reported the use of newsletters as means of communication at PA level[48] but the latest information available to the evaluation experts dates back to 2019. PA 1A, PA 8, PA 9 and PA 10 reported the number of their subscribers ranging from 896 (PA 1A) to 3,400 (PA 10).

Presuming that the newsletter addressees could be 'well-' or 'relatively' well-informed and interested in the Strategy and its thematic areas, they provide a good reference for the size of the EUSDR 'bubble'. Approximately 500 readers of the EUSDR Newsletter form the strategic core of the 'bubble', while PA newsletter readers are considerably bigger thematic side 'bubbles'. PA 10 has the biggest 'bubble' as it also partly covers an external communication target group 'Civil society / Business sector' and can be regarded rather as more of an outer than a side 'bubble'.

[48] *Questionnaire for MRS Thematic (Priority) Area Coordinators* for the 3rd report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

Newsletters have been assessed as relatively more efficient for 'Institutional / Government' ranked #12 versus 'Civil society / Business sector' ranked #18.

Since April 2020, 31 **videos** were created and disseminated on the YouTube channel. These videos include 25 thematic clips on Pillars or Priority Areas of the Strategy (posted as a series), two clips of general presentations, two interventions of Commissioner Elisa Ferreira, and two videos highlighting progress during specific EUSDR presidencies.

Judging only from the EUSDR YouTube channel, the reach is low. There is an average of 46 views of the most 31 recent videos. Some videos receive more attention than others, e.g. general presentations and specific EUSDR presidencies.

Videos posted on FB, TW and LN are appropriate means to reach people with less knowledge and awareness of EUSDR. They are also appropriate to promote the Danube Region Strategy among policymakers beyond the EUSDR community. Nevertheless, the survey proves that videos are more appropriate for more knowledgeable target groups, i.e., 'Institutional / Government' ranked #8, than 'Civil society / Business sector' ranked #15.

The success stories e-brochure is an appropriate and efficient communication measure. Produced by the DSP for the 10th anniversary of the EUSDR this online interactive brochure[49] provides information on important historical landmarks of the Strategy as well as an overview of activities supported by the Strategy in all PAs. The e-brochure was launched on 18 October 2021, one week before the EUSDR Annual Forum in Bratislava, Slovakia. The link to the brochure was disseminated to all NCs, PACs, DG REGIO, Interact and DTP asking for further dissemination on all possible networks. It was also promoted by posts on the EUSDR social media platforms. After three weeks (5 November 2021) it had been viewed 350 times.

Two PAs – PA 4 and PA 5 have reported publishing a joint brochure with success stories of the two Priority Areas in 2020[50].

An online brochure is a good way to take stock of past activities and tie together different dimensions of the collective EUSDR effort. It is a steppingstone for future activities and reminds regional players that the Strategy is active and ready for the next decade. It may reach out beyond the EUSDR community, but clearly supports community consolidation. This is confirmed by the online survey ranking the e-brochure comparatively high for both 'Institutional / Government' (#4) and 'Civil society / Business sector' (#6) target groups.

Printed brochures are increasingly phasing out in modern communication due to their controversial and largely undetectable efficiency. The available information suggests that the last two EUSDR printed brochures were published and disseminated in 2019. The number of copies ranged from 5,000 to 10,000. One important aspect of printed brochures is that they can reach target groups that cannot be

[49] https://danube-region.eu/communication-tools/multimedia/

[50] https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/sites/13/2019/11/Success_Stories_2017-2019_vegleges_compressed.pdf

reached via online tools. The interviews disclosed that there are still some geographies in the Danube Region where such communication tools are important, especially when translated into local languages.

Success stories are significant elements to support EUSDR activities. They are found in a dedicated part of the communication section on the EUSDR website. Such printed or online publications provide useful supporting material to physical events where the Strategy can be presented to policymakers or update them. The dedicated sub-section on the EUSDR website is also appropriate. It could be further optimised using a standard template and a browsing tool (e.g., by keyword, PA, or funding source). Success stories especially when published online are deemed to be the most effective and appropriate communication measures in the publication category. The online version can be considered as an 'online tool', analysed above.

The evaluation experts did not review any **other information materials such as fliers, leaflets, etc.** Also, the survey respondents did not assess them highly – ranked #14 for 'Institutional / Government' and #20 for 'Civil society / Business sector'. Printed materials are gradually becoming obsolete as means of communication also due to environmental awareness and, hence, should be produced only in case there is a strong and valid justification. At the same time, it has to be taken into account that in certain geographic areas of the Danube region (especially those outside the EU) such communication measure might still be appropriate.

6.1.2.3 Events

Events are appropriate means of communication for both external target groups and are on average the highest rated in the online survey, 79 points out of 100 for the 'Institutional / Government' target group and 71 for 'Civil society / Business sector'.

Thematic conferences organised by PAs, the EC and other networks are deemed to be the most effective and appropriate communication measures for both external target groups. Thematic conferences organised by PAs are ranked #1 for both groups, while those organised by the EC are #2 for the 'Institutional / Government' target group and #5 for 'Civil society / Business sector'. Thematic conferences organised by other networks are ranked #5 for 'Institutional / Government' target group and #8 for 'Civil society / Business sector'. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions the EUSDR has held around 30 thematic events since March 2020, although most of them online[51].

There is a high appreciation for focused presence meetings. Since 2020 the emphasis is presumably first on presence and then on thematic focus. All the interviewees noted that direct human contact and onsite socialising are greatly missed during the pandemic restrictions. More pandemic impacts are analysed in chapter 7.

Annual Forum (AF) is without doubt an appropriate and effective communication channel. It is the central event of the year organised by the EUSDR Presidency. It allows the EUSDR policymakers and stakeholders interested in collaboration in the Danube Region to meet and pave the way for future

[51] https://danube-region.eu/communication/past-events/

cooperation. Usually it includes thematic panels, ministerial meetings and information sessions on the main available funding sources.

The **2020 EUSDR AF** was organised online by the Croatian Presidency and involved 735 people, of which more than 50 were officials in the Danube Region. The **2021 EUSDR AF** was organised by the Slovak Presidency in a hybrid format, i.e., limited onsite participation complemented by direct broadcast of the event. Altogether 679 persons participated, including 90 on-site in Bratislava. For both events, participants came from the EC, DG REGIO, NC, PACs, Managing/National Authorities, academia, NGOs, SMEs and the media. Following the AF event, a follow-up newsletter is usually distributed to up to 500 subscribers. This includes information on the EUSDR embedding, future calls for proposals, events and similar.

Lately the **EUSDR AF** have focused on fewer thematic areas, which were set by the presidencies, and several interviewees acknowledged that some PAs felt alienated. Hence, the initial purpose of being a discussion place for all the potential areas and ideas has not been fully reached. This again may be a side-effect of the pandemic. One example is that AF side events were only possible in a limited capacity, with the Danube Participation Day as an exception. This may be why the EUSDR AF was ranked lower in the online survey compared to the other events (#6 for 'Institutional / Government' target group and #19 for 'Civil society / Business sector'). There is also a drop in the perception of how effective or helpful the AF is since 2019 when the EU stakeholder survey in the EUSDR Operational evaluation ranked it as the top communication tool. The AFs are certainly deemed as much more effective for the 'Institutional / Government' target group than for 'Civil society / Business sector' possibly due to the narrowed focus.

The EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020 also envisaged **travelling exhibitions** though none has yet been organised. This is probably also why online respondents did not rate their effectiveness highly. Nevertheless, especially for the 'Civil society / Business sector' and its sub-groups this communication measure can still be appropriate and should be considered when the onsite events are more feasible. The travelling exhibitions are ranked above more conventional communication tools (newsletters or printed brochures) as they can be appropriate add-ons to other events.

6.1.2.4 Media

Though the EUSDR Communication Guide 2020 provides detailed guidelines on how to work with the media, there is not much evidence of this. Understandably during the COVID-19 pandemic 'era' the focus has been on online media and there has been a dedicated online media campaign.

Between 16 April and 30 June 2021, for ten weeks there was a paid ad campaign via Google ads and Facebook. The ad campaign ran on 28 web portals in the 14 Danube Region countries and on relevant Facebook accounts. When selecting the web portals to promote the EUSDR, only those portals displaying content related to business, health, science & technology, travel & tourism, IT&C, economic & financial, social, education, culture & art, transport, energy, environment, politics were considered. Video and electronic banners promoting the EUSDR were displayed. A banner/ video was displayed to a user only once. The campaign had three components and produced notable results. In some instances, more than 20 million impressions of a banner were generated and ensured a reach of at least 12.4 million. Beyond the information communicated through FB and other web portals, the campaign

resulted in a significant increase in followers on FB - from 3.2 to 6.8 thousand). This will boost the long-term audience of the EUSDR publications on FB.

The online survey respondents assessed general media relations as appropriate and effective for both external target groups. During the interviews it was pointed out that the EUSDR communication should be integrated into the official communication strategy of each respective institution that the stakeholder represents. This task is similar to embedding, when the EUSDR communication measures need to find their place and fit in an overarching framework.

6.2 EQ 9: Which narratives have been successful in promoting the EUSDR on the political level?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

The EUSDR narratives focusing on cooperation and the resultant wellbeing are seen as the most effective in the overall communication. The common concepts of 'togetherness', unity, joint actions and coordination are the most common showcasing the thematic categories of water, youth, culture and EU enlargement. The success stories demonstrate the 'fruits' of a decade long cooperation and are valuable 'selling points' of the EUSDR. More strategic and wider storylines of the overall EUSDR action, rather than PA-centred narratives are important for bridging with EU agendas.

Storytelling about the EUSDR achievements is successful at all levels - thematic, strategic and governance. Communication could be further streamlined and developed by setting concrete goals at each level, but at strategic and governance levels in particular. Among the most important is gaining and retaining adequate political attention.

In the online survey, the EUSDR stakeholders were asked to indicate (Q24) which narratives have been most successful in promoting the EUSDR and which they find useful when communicating about the EUSDR. As a result, narratives or rather messages and themes at all three action levels - thematic, strategic and governance were proposed, however, with a varying balance between the levels. Please see Annex III 'Online survey process and responses to the open questions' and a brief summary below.

The current slogan 'Prosperity through diversity' was most often mentioned in the survey responses as manifesting the EUSDR essence, while it is not a narrative itself. The respondents also mention several other governance level messages all of which have a focus on cooperation, such as 'togetherness', 'one team, one stream', 'joint works better than alone' and 'EUSDR = cooperation/coordination platform'. These emphasise the core idea behind mutual work and can serve as part of the narrative for internal communication. They also resonate with external subgroups that already have relatively good knowledge of the benefits of regional and transnational cooperation. For greater efficiency the messages could be strengthened by thematic or strategic content.

In the view of the EUSDR stakeholders, the Strategy implementation is best showcased along the following few broader thematic categories that characterise the Danube Region: (1) youth, (2) water, (3) culture and (4) EU enlargement.

A very few specific thematic narratives were outlined by the EU stakeholders, among them the story of the Danube sturgeon has been surprisingly popular and known even outside the region. Another thematic topic at the moment appears to be the DAVID form - Danube Navigation Standard Forms harmonising border control procedures for mobility along the inland waterway. This is a very good narrative containing a strong and easily perceived message for the business community. For a topic to stand out in the communication flow it must be (1) simple and concrete, (2) recognised by a wider audience, (3) ideally have tangible results as concrete benefits and (3) have a catchy reference title.

Another question in the online survey (Q10) asked the PACs and NCs about activities that can best showcase the implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. The idea is that good narratives can be built on concrete activities or outcomes achieved by PAs or NCs. As expected, the responses referred not only to thematic aspects of the Strategy, but also to the work of EUSDR stakeholders at strategic and governance levels, e.g., their daily activities to make cooperation and coordination happen. This helps develop narratives that are not only thematic, but also build on concrete achievements and milestones at strategic and governance levels whose significance is too often underestimated in the MRS communication. Such a holistic approach encompassing all three or at least two levels of MRS better reflects the work and success of the EUSDR. A list of responses to the online survey question is in Annex III 'Online survey process and responses to the open questions'.

The responses to the online survey mainly reflect the opinions of stakeholders on 'their own success stories'. However, this is an interesting indicator of how successful activities are defined by the stakeholders and provides a good starting point for developing the narratives that can become 'unique selling points' of the Strategy. Here again it would be useful to specify the target group or even better a specific subgroup.

The video by Ukraine upon undertaking the EUSDR Presidency offers a good narrative for the strategic and governance levels. The message is even bolder today, emphasising that European values and benefits must not be taken for granted. Transnational cooperation has to be strengthened and communicating appropriate narratives is vital for political commitment.

The PA interviews revealed that a goal of the EUSDR communication is to gain and retain adequate political attention. Complementary to developing the narrative in individual macro-regions, MRS activities across the four macro-regions can receive increased political attention. The Interact Programme MRS Capacity building Working Group provides continued support for the EUSDR including for communication.

Streamlining EUSDR communication with the help of strategic documents has been justified. There is a clear vision of how the communication should be delivered at the EUSDR level. However, as communication and the EUSDR are a continuous process with many stakeholder categories involved the following enhancements could be beneficial:

- Many stakeholders noted the high expectations for political attention and support for all thematic areas at all decision-making levels, but the national level in particular. There are several ways of pushing the EUSDR higher up the political agenda, which can be streamlined into two flows. The first is direct communication with decision-makers via various channels, also using explicit and

relevant narratives. The second is more indirect communication to continuously increase public awareness.

- It could be useful to further distinguish the target groups for external communication by their familiarity with the EUSDR. The existing target subgroups could be assessed and classified by their level of EUSDR knowledge as: (1) well-informed, (2) average and (3) little or not informed. This way communication can become more explicit and efficient. Addressing more homogenous target groups enables tailoring the content, information volume, regularity, and other characteristics and increases efficiency of the communication.

- Using a bottom-up approach the PAs could define their own two or three main external target groups for communication (e.g., businesses, academia, youth, etc.) and assess them according to the level of their EUSDR knowledge. The differentiation of target groups can stem from the stakeholder mapping exercise already completed by PAs and include a brief analysis of their newsletter addressees.

- There is a clear need for additional resources including more external communication professionals, especially for PAs with a wide spectrum of target groups, e.g., PAs under Pillar 3. This could be outsourcing on a task-by-task basis. However, the complexity of MRS communication means it would be useful to have more overarching support as does the EU Baltic Sea Strategy with the dedicated Interreg project Let's Communicate.

- The aim should be for more coordinated EUSDR communication based on strategic pointers for all major target groups and subgroups to be used horizontally and transnationally by DSP, thematically and strategically by PAs and nationally by NCs. Certain processes are more efficient when centrally managed or at least coordinated, e.g., by the DSP which ideally should have an overview of all or most of the communication activities and feedback.

- NCs integrating the EUSDR communication into the communication strategy of the institution they represent should ensure the MRS specific message and narrative is still visible and maintained in the overall information flow.

- The EUSDR narratives should be regarded as the Strategy's 'selling points'. They should be concise and pinpointed. Further development of narratives would also benefit from greater homogeneity of the target groups. When building the narratives thematic content should be enhanced with strategic and governance achievements and milestones to better reflect the full capacity and potential of the EUSDR. For example, focused and specific messages (including videos) are more appropriate for 'EU institutions' and 'National (line) ministries and other national governmental institutions' which are well informed about the Strategy. Their narratives should be more strategic and governance based, while for 'Business representatives' and 'Mass media' the messages should be easy to perceive and mainly thematic.

7 Evaluation theme D: Impact of COVID-19

7.1 EQ1: What influence does the COVID-19 pandemic have on the implementation, impact and communication of the Strategy? What has changed and what should be adapted for the future?

Response to the Evaluation Question:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant influence on implementing the EUSDR Action Plan, as it had on many areas all over the world. The pandemic and its effects from travel restrictions, lack of tourists and economic recession to interrupted global value chains and new EU instruments have surely changed how the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and its implementation can be interpreted. The effects are mainly negative but there are also some positive ones.

The highest impact was detected on the 'implementation of (strategic) projects and processes' followed by 'coordination processes at the macro-regional level'. Despite the obvious negative effects on personal contact, networking and coordination, many stakeholders also indicated positive effects from digitalisation, reduced travel costs, and wider outreach with digital/videoconference formats for meetings and conferences.

Finally, specific effects of the pandemic and related societal changes on the EUSDR impact have been identified, even if it seems too early to assess their extent. Overall, the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 has not lost its relevance and appropriateness due to COVID-19. Additional guidance documents on how the pandemic affects the missions and targets of PAs might fill the conceptual gap between the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and the new needs and challenges.

It is still too early to judge the ultimate impact of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the EUSDR stakeholders were asked to express their views on how the pandemic and restrictions affected their work. Below are summaries of their responses with some analytical conclusions stemming also from the interviews and expert judgements.

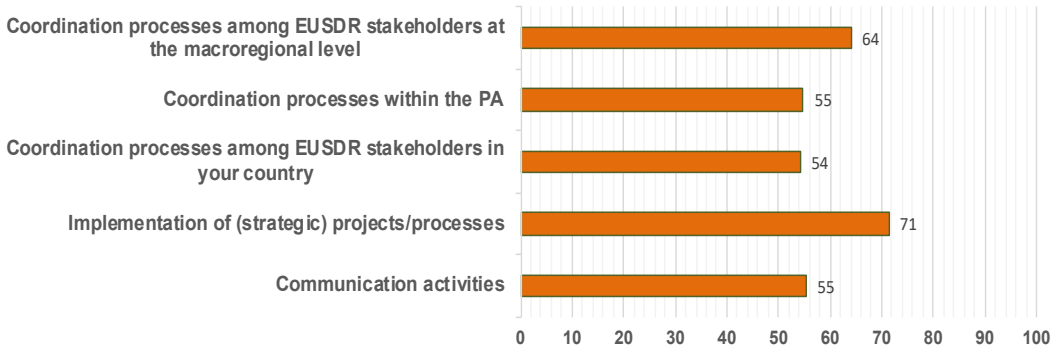
7.1.1 COVID-19 and the EUSDR implementation and communication

Most stakeholders identify negative impacts on EUSDR activities, however the average of 60 points out of 100 shows that these impacts are seen as moderate overall, please see Figure 7-1 below. However, within the average opinions diverge as shown in Figure 7-2.

The highest impact has been on the 'implementation of (strategic) projects and processes', followed by 'coordination processes at the macro-regional level'. There are also negative impacts for the other coordination processes and communication, however more people noticed no or almost no negative impact. Digital tools may have helped overcome travel restrictions and lack of physical meetings by making working from home easier.

Figure 7-1 Stakeholder view on how COVID-19 negatively impacted EUSDR activities (1)

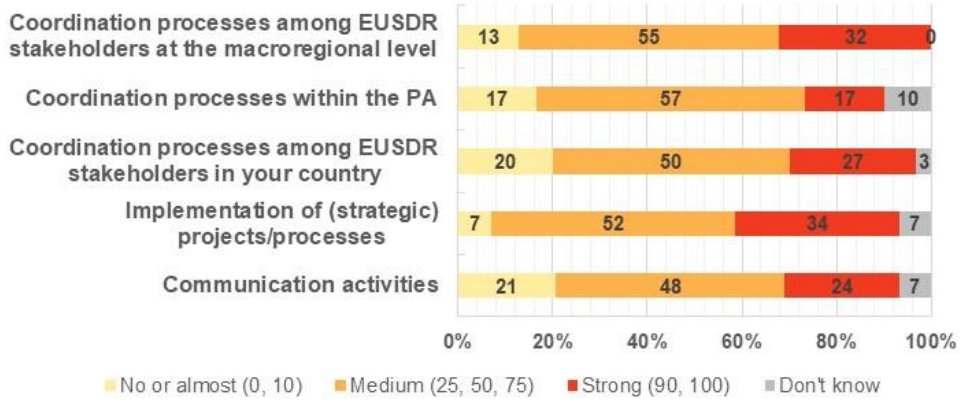
(Q25: To what extent were the following EUSDR activities negatively impacted by COVID-19 and related lockdown measures? [0: no impact; 100: strong negative impact])



Source: Online survey (n=29-31)

Figure 7-2 Stakeholder view on how COVID-19 negatively impacted EUSDR activities (2)

(Q25: To what extent were the following EUSDR activities negatively impacted by COVID-19 and related lockdown measures? [0: no impact; 100: strong negative impact])



Source: Online survey (n=29-31)

There were many responses concerning other negative or even positive effects of COVID-19 on the EUSDR. The negative effects relate to limited personal contact, networking and coordination while the positive effects include reduced travel expenditure, digital tools including efficient digital meeting formats and wider outreach. The responses to the online survey question on the COVID-19 effects can be grouped as follows in Table 7-1.

Table 7-1 Stakeholder responses on positive or negative COVID-19 effects on EUSDR

(Q26: Were there other negative or positive impacts on the EUSDR in relation to COVID-19 and related lockdown measures?)

Type of effect	Responses
Negative effects on personal contact, networking and coordination	*'Negative Impact: Networking with stakeholders/project promoters that require on-site exchange due to trust-building measures.'* *'The impact of COVID is extremely negative. The lack of in-presence event will sooner or later bring to less interest in the EUSDR as a whole.'* *'Negative impacts: lack of personal meetings, less capacity of human resources.'* *'Negative impact: e.g., lack of personal contact and networking.'* *'Decreased possibilities for face-to-face networking and negotiations on difficult questions.'* *'Lack of communication among PACs, lack of energy to collaborate more with the others in general.'*
Effects on budgets – probably leading to additional administrative work but also reduced expenditure for travelling	*'There was an impact on our budget shift. Since we were not able to spend the money for travelling, catering, hall rentals, etc. we have to shift the money.'* *'The online meetings allowed the experts to join without travel expenses.'* *'Reduced costs'.*
Change in needs and revised EUSDR Actions – quick response is considered as positive	*'Cross-macroregional task force on home-schooling established'*
Positive effects on the use of digital tools and efficient digital meeting formats	*'Increased digitalization and time management when dealing with coordination and administrative matters.'* *'Exploration of online tools (positive)'* *'Online SG meetings'* *'Boost for digitalization'*
Positive: wider outreach	*'Positive impact: e.g., possibility for bigger audiences to participate.'*
Positive: despite restrictions, continuity of activities	*'Overall, processes/activities have been successfully continued.'*

Source: Online survey (n=13)

There are clearly more negative effects. In 2020, many EUSDR meetings and activities had to be cancelled. This especially included larger events and meetings with external stakeholders. Similarly, for the rest of the world the EUSDR implementation paused and no content for external communication was available. Coordination and communication among EUSDR governance bodies focused on basic issues and relied on virtual and online meetings.

An interview with the PAC for PA10 showcases the impact:

Due to COVID-19 PA 10 could not implement all the activities as per their workplan. Nevertheless, most of them were done. Some of them with an adjusted timeframe. Due to the COVID 19 crises, all 5 National Participation Days planned for 2020 had to be cancelled. A new format that takes into account the present conditions had to be created. Unfortunately, participation turned out to be very challenging for many organisations in an online meeting format. Therefore, it is all the more important to think of how to make better use of digital formats at national and regional level as well as how to adapt the format to the respective national/regional needs of countries. Additionally, the National Participation Days are not following a 'one size fits all' model as the region covers various political landscape and various forms of political culture, particularly regarding communication and exchange between state and non-state stakeholders. From the point of view of the civil society organisations, the digital meetings should be incorporated and potential formats for National Participation Days that are tailor-made fit to the needs and situations in the respective regions and countries need to be discussed.

Despite the obvious negative effects on personal contacts, networking and coordination, many stakeholders also indicated the positive effects of digitalisation, reduced travel costs and wider outreach from using digital/videoconference formats for meetings and conferences. Overall, there seems to be relief that the EUSDR activities in general could continue at least at a minimum level despite the severe restrictions on work and travel.

The stakeholders were also asked about what processes or tools established during the pandemic they wish to be continued and their answers are in Table 7-2 below.

Table 7-2 Stakeholder responses on maintaining processes/tools established during the COVID-19 pandemic

(Q27: Which processes or tools established during COVID-19 pandemic would you wish to be continued? Would these need to be improved or adapted?)

Type of effect	Responses
Continuation of online meetings (in particular for SG or Working Groups) but in addition to physical events	*'Online Briefings on topics (for SG members or Working Group members) proved to be successful means to pass on information and provided the possibility of Q&A in order to update also new members. In doing so, the SG Meetings/Working Group Meetings don't have to take into account different levels of knowledge about initiatives & activities.'* *'[We] found a way to move forward by organising at least the SG meeting once in 6 months and sometime some other event, whenever possible.'* *'It would be really helpful if online meetings continued also in the future. They save time and money considerably. They are flexible and smart solution of communication.'* *'More online meetings, but not only.'* *'Wider use of online meetings (but not exclusively).'* *'Tailor-made use of digital meetings.'* *'Online meetings should definitely continue. Digital has huge potential for all cross-border cooperation, as it allows for more regular exchange. However, virtual meetings need to be complemented by high-quality real-world meetings to create networks, ideas and trust.'* *'On-line meetings where feasible and needed (like administrative and coordination issues, not for crucial questions).'*
Hybrid events (online in addition to physical)	*'Hybrid form of handling the events'*

Type of effect	Responses
	'We can have hybrid meetings so those people can also participate who cannot travel.' *'Possibility to join online if not able to join in-person - however, this only applies to conferences maybe, and short meetings. Interactive is hard to be conducted online.'*
Use of other online/digital tools	*'Online tools such as brochure, app. Instagram account could be done.'*
On-going (technical) support offered by DSP	*'We would like to thank to the DSP about their readiness to support us technically and also in terms of content by always presenting their activities within the EUSDR context.'*

Source: Online survey (n=12)

There is a clear preference to continue the use of online meetings in addition to physical ones. During an interview a positive phenomenon of 'increased meeting efficiency' was outlined - '3 meetings per day instead of 3 days per meeting'. Hybrid conferences were also mentioned as a positive takeaway together with more intense use of digital tools, e.g., social media for communication. The DSP technical support was also highlighted and should continue.

7.1.2 COVID-19 and EUSDR impact

An early analysis of the effects of the pandemic shows that COVID-19 marks a 'before' and 'after' for many socioeconomic developments. However, not all medium and long-term COVID-19 related trends will be new. As a recent study highlights, 'the medium-term effects will largely depend on the imprint the pandemic leaves on behaviour. Socio-economic trends are mainly influenced by behavioural changes and restrictions. The pandemic has not so much created new trends but slowed some (e.g. cruise tourism, business travel) and accelerated others (e.g. digitalisation, home working, home schooling, streaming, online shopping). This implies that the territorial impacts of these trends have paused or accelerated. Taking digitalisation as an example, digital infrastructure and literacy affect whether people and businesses in an area get a head start or face transition challenges. The macro-geographical trends of the past 40 years will most likely continue. The pandemic will not end nor soften polarisation and fragmentation between societal groups and places but rather accelerate these trends.'[52]

The potential impact on the EUSDR could include the following effects:

- Territorial and socio-economic challenges have aggravated in some areas, e.g., transport and travel, tourism, health, etc. which were not considered in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020. An updated territorial analysis would probably lead to an adjustment of the EUSDR priorities, which might be significant for some PAs with additional cross-cutting needs.

- Digitalisation has seen an important breakthrough during the pandemic which has opened up new opportunities for action, new needs and new insights that will affect all sectors and areas in the

[52] European Committee of the Regions (2021): The state of the regions, cities and villages in the areas of socio-economic policies. Contribution to the 2021 EU Annual Regional and Local Barometer. Report by Kai Böhme et al. Page IX.

future. Some PAs may now see the need to re-formulate their contribution to digitalisation and work much more towards the digital transition than foreseen in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020.

- With the NextGenerationEU instrument and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, considerable additional funding is available. However, also certain policy objectives (i.e., recovery, resilience, green transition) have become much more important since 2020. The macro-regional stakeholders will need to adapt to this changed context with a stronger focus on recovery and the green/digital transformation.

- Due to new border controls and travel restrictions during the pandemic, borders have (again) become important, also between EU Member States. This emphasises the difficult role of border territories and their need for cooperation. The same applies for the EU external borders where cooperation has become more difficult but at the same time more essential to serve the basic needs of people and businesses in the border territories. Border territory needs might be in even more focus for EUSDR projects, processes and activities than before.

The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 has not lost its relevance due to COVID-19. However, in many areas the achievements will differ from those expected. Additional guidance documents on how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the missions and targets of PAs might be required to fill the conceptual gap between the EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and the new needs and challenges.

8 Recommendations

This evaluation shows that implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 is going well. The Strategy is being implemented based on a solid governance structure and with a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities that only need fine-tuning in specific cases (e.g., when new staff take over the EUSDR tasks). Processes and tools effectively support the implementation. Administrative tasks such as reporting, internal communication and coordination with multiple stakeholders within and outside the EUSDR system produce a workload that is highly relevant for the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan 2020. This might be seen as burdensome, especially by the professionals that do not work full-time on the EUSDR implementation.

Within this overall positive context, some recommendations can be made to increase efficiency and especially to maximise impacts and contributions to wider policy objectives. Five general recommendations could help improve the work of the EUSDR in the future.

1. Make sure that all PAs can and know how to contribute to the overarching objectives and horizontal topics. This may require capacity building for the EUSDR stakeholders, joint cross-PA activities on horizontal topics, as well as frameworks and joint reflections on missions, impacts and achievements. For example, different PAs should contribute actively to digitalisation and smart specialisation, as outlined in the revised Action Plan 2020. However, the Action Plan only gives a very broad orientation. The EUSDR impact on these horizontal topics can be much more visible and relevant if a common agenda is developed with contributions from all PAs.

   Another example is climate change which is closely related to PA 2 Sustainable Energy. Greening energy production and distribution as well as other areas related to energy consumption has become considerably more important in recent years and is now a central topic that needs input or has an impact on all PAs in one way or another. Finding solutions not only requires technical knowledge but also refers to social innovation and transformations in all sectors of society. The EUSDR needs to urgently address this new priority within PA 2 but also especially within the other PAs.

   The recommendation is to not increase administrative burden on key stakeholders such as PACs or NCs (for example by asking them for additional projects or actions), but rather to work on a cross-PA approach with strategic workshops on horizontal topics (digitalisation, smart specialisation, climate change/energy, SDGs) and develop a common agenda for how each PA can contribute to and/or benefit from these frameworks. This would help to build capacity, understanding and the feeling that all contribute together (not each PA on its own). Time could be allocated to allow for more strategic-oriented activities.

2. Another consideration may be the relevance of short-term developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the circular economy and youth involvement. The EUSDR may need to reconsider how to deal with cross-cutting topics. One example is the Resilience and Recovery Fund and how that links to activities within the EUSDR. Other thematic areas and topics requiring attention in the short to medium-term are the circular economy and youth involvement.

   Although the bioeconomy and circular economy are being increasingly addressed in the EUSDR events including those organised by PA 8, fully integrating them into the Strategy rationale should

be accompanied by strengthening the horizontal frame of climate change and sustainable development. Adding appropriate weight to this practical facet of sustainable development is vital to secure its uptake by the other PAs.

Youth involvement that has already been taken up by PA 10 could be extended to other themes.

3. While the EUSDR implementation has reached a certain level of maturity, ongoing empowerment of key stakeholders is required to facilitate wider impact. This refers, for example, to increased outreach beyond core groups and to more professional communication of the EUSDR implementation. Connecting policy, science, business and civil society experts from all the EUSDR countries continues to be a key function of the EUSDR.

4. Take on board the positive lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, for example the benefits of online meetings and virtual conferences that increase outreach and the participation. Lessons learned and good practices from each PA should be collected and shared with all PAs.

5. Finally, the evaluation reflects on the complexity of the EUSDR implementation. During the work some challenging aspects appeared repeatedly, especially monitoring, common understanding across PAs, external communication and administrative burden. The challenges to monitor and evaluate macro-regional actions are not surprising given the complexity of macro-regional cooperation. However, with a transparent impact model, the processes for monitoring, reporting and work planning can be streamlined and harmonised, making the work more effective and efficient. Another benefit would be to prevent misunderstandings such as indicators related to objectives, targets or expected results. This would also help to visualise the contributions of each EUSDR stakeholder.

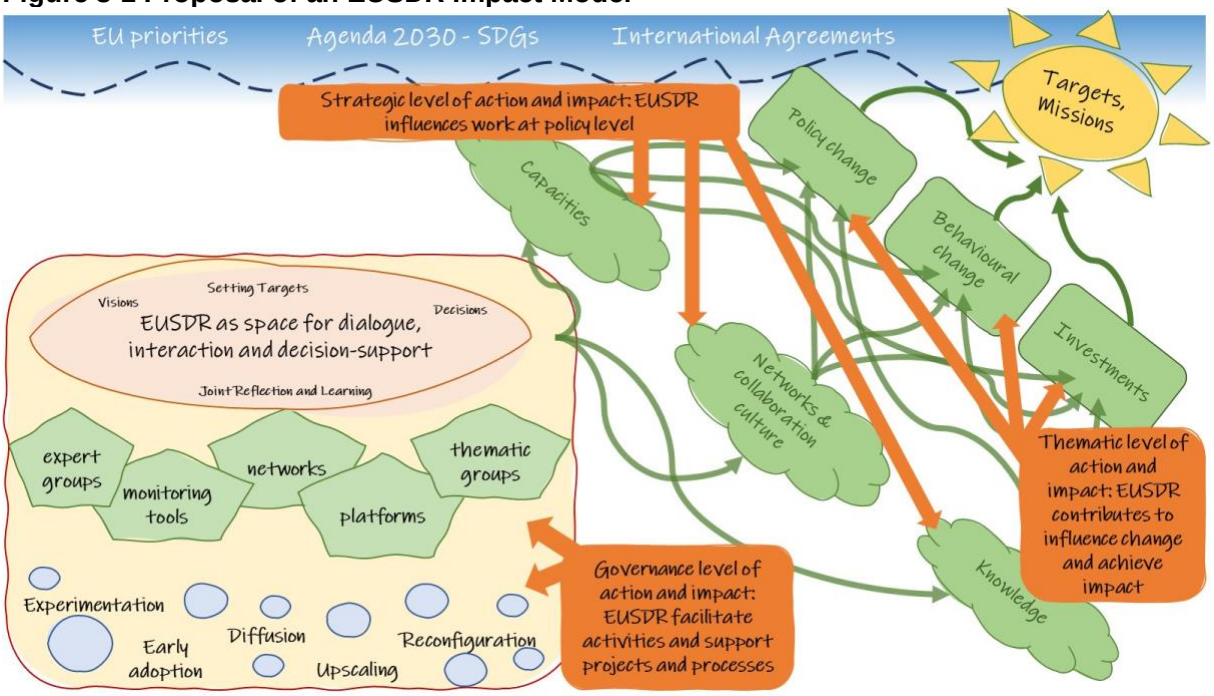
   The recommendation is to develop a common EUSDR impact model that structures activities at three levels: strategic, thematic and governance/facilitation. Monitoring and reporting would be simplified with a clearer differentiation between long-term and short-term goals. Communication (including strategic storytelling) could be centred on ‘missions’ and different levels of implementation, celebrating not only thematic results, but also valuable strategic and political achievements and processes.

   Following this approach, the graphic below provides an example of how the EUSDR activities can be structured and how this logic might be used for internal monitoring and reporting as well as for communication with stakeholders:

   - The yellow box highlights activities carried out by the EUSDR stakeholder.
   - The green clouds show activities stimulated or induced by the EUSDR activities, but mainly carried out by other players, e.g., in the context of their regular planning mandates and activities.
   - The green boxes detail changes that have been achieved through these activities.
   - The yellow sun displays the long-term mission which is fed by sub-objectives and targets.

The graphic provides an example of an impact model. It can be applied to each PA, to a horizontal framework and to the EUSDR as a whole. It can be used in capacity-building or training exercises within the DSP, with EUSDR key stakeholders (PACs/NCs) or within Steering Groups.

Figure 8-1 Proposal of an EUSDR Impact Model



Source: Own elaboration

Annexes

Annex I List of documentation

1. The revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020
2. EUSDR Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan 2019
3. EUSDR Implementation Report 2019
4. EUSDR Implementation Report 2019 Annex Progress on Targets
5. EUSDR Implementation Report 2019 Annex Progress on Actions
6. EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018
7. EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 Annex Projects
8. EUSDR Operational Evaluation 2019
9. EUSDR Cooperation One Can See
10. EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper 2020
11. EUSDR Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups 2020
12. EUSDR PA events since 2018 Overview
13. EUSDR Communication Strategy November 2020
14. EUSDR Communication Guide December 2020
15. EUSDR Communication Plan 2019
16. EUSDR Communication Plan 2020
17. EUSDR Communication Plan 2021
18. Guidance Paper for identifying and listing EUSDR Strategic Projects/Processes Draft, August 2021
19. EUSDR EMBEDDING – FROM WORDS TO ACTION! Discussion Paper February 2021
20. Monitoring of Embedding the EUSDR into EU Funds and Funding Programmes 2021-2027
21. EUSDR Action Plan 2010
22. Rules of Procedure of the EUSDR National Coordinators
23. Report on the Public hearings on the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan 2019
24. EUSDR Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders 2022
25. Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas / Draft Reporting Template 2022
26. Meeting minutes:
    a. PAC and NC meetings
    b. PA SG meetings
27. PA reports:
    a. to DTP
    b. to EC: Questionnaire for MRS Thematic (Priority) Area Coordinators for the 3rd report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies
28. NC reports to EC
29. MRS related documents:
    a. the 3rd report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies 2020
    b. Anders Bergstrom et al. (2020) EU Macro-regional strategies – Laboratories for New Europe
    c. COWI et al. (2017): Study on macroregional strategies and their links with cohesion policy. Commissioned by DG REGIO. European Commission
    d. Turșie, C. (2015): Macro-regional strategies of European integration. What can the Danube Region learn from the Baltic Sea Region?
    e. INTERACT (2017): Embedding macro-regional strategies. Study prepared by INTERACT with Jürgen Pucher and Thomas Stumm
    f. Haarich, Silke (2018): Building a new tool to evaluate networks and multi-stakeholder governance systems. Evaluation

g. EU Baltic Sea Strategy related documents:
    i. EUSBSR Action Plan 2021
    ii. Communication Point of the EUSBSR project

30. EU policy related documentation, e.g.:
    a. European Commission (2021): Commission Staff Working Document. Guidance to Member States. Recovery and Resilience Plans
    b. European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2020): Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for al. 2020
    c. EU-Western Balkans High-Level Meeting (2021): Brdo Declaration, 6 October 2021
    d. European Commission (2021): EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration. COM(2021) 393 final. Brussels, 14.7.2021
    e. Zillmer, S. et al. (forthcoming): Analysis of Cross-border obstacles between EU Member States and Enlargement Countries. Report for the European Commission. Unpublished Final Report October 2021
    f. Leonard, M. et al. (2021): The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal. Policy Brief by ECFR and Bruegel. February 2021
    g. European Commission (2020): Shaping Europe's Digital Future
    h. Flash Eurobarometer 497 Citizen's awareness and perception of EU regional policy Report (October 2021)

31. Thematic areas' related websites and documents, e.g.:
    a. European Court of Auditors, 2015, Inland Waterway Transport in Europe
    b. European Committee of the Regions (2021): The state of the regions, cities and villages in the areas of socio-economic policies. Contribution to the 2021 EU Annual Regional and Local Barometer. Report by Kai Böhme et al.

Annex II Online survey questionnaire

Online-Survey

Policy/impact evaluation of the EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region

Dear EUSDR Priority Area Coordinator,
dear National Coordinator,

We highly appreciate your participation in this survey which is an essential part of the EUSDR Policy/Impact evaluation. Your experience and opinion are of the utmost importance as they will provide insights on the situation on the ground.

The Policy/impact evaluation focuses on the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020, the Communication Strategy as well as several recent tools for monitoring and embedding the Strategy into EU funded programmes. It seeks valid judgements on "if?" and "how?" the envisaged actions and tools can lead to achieving the Strategy goals. Moreover, the Strategy re-boost has coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak which is likely to lead to further changes in its framework conditions, content and priorities, and to accelerate digitalisation as a result of the general shift towards increased online activities. The survey questions are structured around the three main parts of this evaluation being implementation, impact and communication. COVID-19 is a pervading theme of this evaluation. The last, but not least are a few concluding questions about the EUSDR future and how and when you would see a need for the next Action Plan update.

If you have any questions when filling in the survey, don't hesitate to contact our colleague Mr. Clément Corbineau at clement.corbineau@spatialforesight.eu .

Thank you in advance for your time!

General information

1 Country of your organisation

Dropdown menu countries

2 Organisation you represent

_____

3 In which capacity is your organisation involved in the EUSDR

a. PAC
b. NC
c. Other (please, specify): _____

4 If you are a PAC, which PA do you represent? _____

A: IMPLEMENTATION

5 In your opinion to what extent are the actions and targets defined in the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 (a) coherent, (b) relevant, (c) appropriate and (d) realistic? (PACs can respond about their respective Priority Area)

[0: not at all; 100: fully]

	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
Coherent: there is a clear logic on how actions are leading to the set targets and strategic objectives								
Relevant: the actions and targets respond to the needs, policies and priorities of the stakeholders								
Appropriate: the chosen actions are suitable for reaching the strategic objectives given the available means and considering the nature of the different policy fields								
Realistic: the actions can achieve the main objectives of the Priority Areas considering the available means								

6 To what extent are the below listed resources and processes useful to implement the EUSDR? Please, assess them focusing on those modes of implementation that you directly use or meetings you attend.

[0: not useful at all; 100: very useful]

Modes of implementation / internal communication measures	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	N/A
Internal discussion group - mailing list for the whole EUSDR governance structure								
General list of the EUSDR stakeholders published on the website								
1. NC meetings								

2. TRIO Presidency meetings								
3. PAC meetings								
4. Joint NC-PAC meetings								
5. Individual meetings with DSP representatives								
6. Meetings with/of different EUSDR Task-Force groups								
7. Other ad hoc meetings/workshops with EUSDR core stakeholders								
Internal newsletter								
EUSDR intranet								
Joint online NC/PAC calendar with internal and external EUSDR relevant events								
National coordination platforms/networks for the EUSDR								

7 Do you use other resources, process and tools for the implementation of the EUSDR not mentioned above? Please specify below which ones.

8 How much time in hours do you spend on the following activities in average in a week?

In hours	None	1-2 hours	3-5 hours	5-8 hours	8-12hours	12-16 hours	More than 16 hours
Coordination within the bilateral /trilateral PAC team							
Coordination within the national PAC team							
Coordination with other PACs							
Coordination with the DSP							
Coordination with your NC							
Coordination with NCs							
Internal ministerial coordination							
Coordination with other national stakeholders							
Coordination with other stakeholders							
Preparing Monitoring and Documentation activities							
Attendance of conferences							
Coordination with existing Projects							
Coordination with prospective projects							
Other EUSDR activities							

9 What are the main challenges for the implementation of the EUSDR? You can select multiple responses.

Lack of awareness on the EUSDR	○
Lack of funding	○
Lack of co-funding	○
Lack of interest among stakeholders	○
Weak thematic expertise of SG members	○
Lack of relevant/common projects/activities	○
Lack of political support on regional/national level	○
Coordination at national level	○
Divergence between the PA/EUSDR and national priorities	○
Lack of personnel resources	○
Lack of continuity of personnel	○
Coordination between different sectors or stakeholders	○
Challenges related to communication	○

Challenges related to outreach to target groups	○
Challenges related to administrative processes	○

Other

10 Can you name three activities that can best showcase the implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020? (For PACs in their Priority Area, for NCs at the national level.)

1.

2.

3.

11 To what extent do the EUSDR activities in your thematic field/country tackle the following horizontal frames?

[0: not at all; 100: fully]

	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
Digitalisation								
Migration and demographic change								
Climate change								
Sustainable Development								

12 To implement your job within the EUSDR more effectively, what changes in processes in your field of work would you recommend?

B: IMPACT

13 Policy impact: to what extent has the EUSDR had a positive impact on the below aspects?

[0: no positive impact; 100: strong positive impact]

	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
Higher awareness on macroregional cooperation								
Coordination of national policies and funding								
Political will and discourse open to cooperation and joint solutions								
Evidence-based investment decisions								
Solution of cross-border obstacles								
Better cross-border cooperation								
Strengthened integration and cooperation with non-EU countries within the Danube region								
Agreements on joint strategic goals and targets								

Cooperative attitudes in national, regional and local authorities								
Capacities in national, regional and local authorities								
Improvement of socioeconomic conditions								
Improvement of environmental conditions								
Resilience and preparedness for unexpected shocks and disasters								

14 Thematic impact: to what extent has the EUSDR had a positive impact on the below aspects?

[0: no positive impact; 100: strong positive impact]

	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
Improved mobility and multimodality – on inland waterways								
Improved mobility and multimodality – for rail, road and air transport								
More sustainable energy in the Danube Region								
Culture and sustainable tourism in the Danube Region								
Good quality of waters								
Well-managed environmental risks								
Preserved biodiversity, good soil quality, less air pollution, landscapes								
The development of a knowledge society								
Competitive enterprises and active clusters								
Better skills and competences, effective and inclusive labour markets								
Strengthened institutional capacities and cooperation								
The Danube region as a safe and secure place to live, work and travel								

15 What other positive or negative policy impacts of the EUSDR have you observed?

16 What needs to be changed to achieve more policy impact?

17 What needs to be changed to achieve more thematic impact?

C: COMMUNICATION

18 Thinking of the target group 'Institutional / Government' how informed and involved in the EUSDR are the following sub-groups?

[0: not informed at all; 100: highly involved and committed]

TARGET GROUPS	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
National (line) ministries and other national governmental institutions								

Regional governments								
Managing authorities								
EU institutions								

19 How effective are the following communication measures in reaching this target group ('Institutional / Government'?)

[0: not effective; 100 very effective]:

MEASURES	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
ONLINE TOOLS								
EUSDR main website https://danube-region.eu/								
EUSDR PA websites								
EUSDR national online platforms where available								
EUSDR site on Facebook https://www.facebook.com/DanubeRegionStrategy								
EUSDR site on LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/in/eusdr/								
EUSDR site on Twitter https://twitter.com/EUSDR								
EUSDR site on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/user/DanubeRegionStrategy								
EUSDR Smart app								
PUBLICATIONS								
Newsletters								
Videos								
Success-stories e-brochure								
Success-stories printed brochure								
Other information materials such as fliers, leaflets etc.								
EVENTS								
EUSDR Annual Forum								
Thematic conferences organised by								
PAs								
EC and affiliated								
Other Networks								
Other events, meetings, conferences								
Travelling exhibitions								
MEDIA								
Online media campaigns								
Media relations: inviting media to the EUSDR event, press-release, etc.								

20 How could the communication be made more effective in addressing the 'Institutional / Government' target group?

21 Thinking of the target group 'Civil society / Business sector' how informed and involved in the EUSDR are the following sub-groups?

[0: not informed at all; 100: highly involved and committed]

TARGET GROUPS	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
Project representatives and potential beneficiaries								
Business representatives								

Regional networks and multipliers such as chambers, etc.								
Civil society, NGOs, Youth organisations								
International organisations								
Educational and research institutions								
Mass media and other influencers								

20 How effective are the following communication measures in reaching this target group ('Civil society / Business sector')?

[0: not effective; 100 very effective]:

MEASURES	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
ONLINE TOOLS								
EUSDR main website https://danube-region.eu/								
EUSDR PA websites								
EUSDR national online platforms where available								
EUSDR site on Facebook https://www.facebook.com/DanubeRegionStrategy								
EUSDR site on LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/in/eusdr/								
EUSDR site on Twitter https://twitter.com/EUSDR								
EUSDR site on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/user/DanubeRegionStrategy								
EUSDR Smart app								
PUBLICATIONS								
Newsletters								
Videos								
Success-stories e-brochure								
Success-stories printed brochure								
Other information materials such as fliers, leaflets etc.								
EVENTS								
EUSDR Annual Forum								
Thematic conferences organised by								
PAs								
EC and affiliated								
Other Networks								
Other events, meetings, conferences								
Travelling exhibitions								
MEDIA								
Online media campaigns								
Media relations: inviting media to the EUSDR event, press-release, etc.								

23 How could the communication be made more effective in addressing the 'Civil society / Business sector target group?

24 Which narratives have been most successful in promoting the EUSDR? Which narrative do you find useful when communicating about the EUSDR?

D. Dealing with COVID - 19

25 To what extent were the following EUSDR activities negatively impacted by COVID-19 and related lockdown measures?

[0: no impact; 100: strong negative impact]

	0	10	25	50	75	90	100	Do not know
Coordination processes among EUSDR stakeholders at the macroregional level								
Coordination processes within the PA								
Coordination processes among EUSDR stakeholders in your country								
Implementation of (strategic) projects/processes								
Communication activities								

26 Were there other negative or positive impacts on the EUSDR in relation to COVID-19 and related lockdown measures?

27 Which processes or tools established during COVID-19 pandemic would you wish to be continued? Would these need to be improved or adapted?

E. FUTURE of the EUSDR

28 Looking into the future, which thematic priorities should the EUSDR address that may not have been in focus so far? What should be modified in the Action Plan and when?

29 What kind of support would you like to receive from other core EUSDR stakeholders in order to better implement the Strategy/the revised EUSDR Action Plan?

Thank you for sharing your experience!

Annex III Online survey process and responses to the open questions

On 3 November 2021 the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) sent out the first invitation to the envisaged respondents. Two reminders were sent on 11 and 17 November 2021 and the deadline extended from 16 November 2021 (initially) to 19 November 2021 (finally).

37 valid responses (i.e., responses with content) were received. However, the actual number of respondents depends on the question as respondents were not obliged to provide answers to all of them. Only effective answers were analysed.

59% of respondents identified themselves as Priority Area Coordinators (22 in total), 22% as National Coordinators (8 in total), and 19% as 'other actors' (7 in total). The 'other actors' presented themselves inter alia as a 'PAC team member', European Social Fund (ESF) Management Authority (MA), 'Beneficiary', PA SG member, 'Implementation of the Operational programme' and 'local programme'.

All PAs are represented with at least one response. Two PAs are represented three times (PA2 and PA 9), and six PAs are represented two times (PA 4, PA 5, PA 6, PA 7, PA 8, PA 11).

Responses from countries are unevenly distributed, in decreasing order: 8 responses (Bulgaria), 6 responses (Austria), 4 responses (Germany, Hungary), 3 responses (Croatia, Slovakia), 2 responses Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia), one response (Slovenia, Ukraine). One response was received from a transnational organisation, as a PA coordinator.

Q7: Do you use other resources, process and tools for the implementation of the EUSDR not mentioned above? Please specify below which ones (n=11)

Responses
Regular stakeholder platforms; networks of Managing Authorities; cross-macro-regional networks
Mailing lits of SG of PA 11
We often use horizontal meetings among PAs, e.g. with PA 7 or PA 5. PA 4 and PA 7 are not thematically close but we can discuss with them the details about PA management. PA 4 and PA 5 are located in one Pillar so this is more about thematic cooperation. Both of them are considerably helpful.
Steering Group meetings of own and other PAs; Regular consultation with key stakeholders; Consultations with EC representatives
Joint meeting with strategic projects of the priority area (back-to-back or side events.
own working groups, Interact, others MRS (especially specific EUSBR action groups), western-balcan steering platform, JRC, Danube Rectors Conference
Priority Area Steering Group meetings and Stakeholder Conferences; Priority Area homepages, social media and newsletters
SG Meetings
proactive coordination/"agenda setting"-type activities by EC
simplification
Interact capacity building, 4 TRIO MRS Presidencies, National annual report on the implementation of the MRS adopted by our Government and presented in Parliament

Q10: Can you name three activities that can best showcase the implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020? (For PACs in their Priority Area, for NCs at the national level) *(n=20)*

Responses
Network of ESF Managing Authorities
Horisonatal meetings between PA 1a and PA 11 held twice a year
Ministerial conference
Energy efficiency in buildings
Comparative assessment of NECP-s and related workshops
Policy recommendations
Support and promote cultural tourism in the Danube Region
Study on water retention in urban areas
Danube Hazard m3c and Tid(y) Up (Interreg DTP projects)
Updated Danube Flood Hazard and Risk maps
Start of Disaster Management Working Group of PA5
Danube Sturgeon Task Force Implementation (own structures)

Responses
Finished analysis, target evaluations, policy papers, recommendations
organized conferences on the relevant topics
synchronized call Innovation Express
Steering Group Meetings and Stakeholder Conferences
ESF MA network
Linking MRS and Interreg actors / governance at national level
extra committment on the DS along with many other necessery committments
co-funding
Youth Involvement
Embedding
Danube Participation Days
Ministerial Conference of Secuirty Minsiters, April 202o, cancelled
Workshop on hybrid threats
Integrated energy market
Preparation of new project propsals for the 2021-207 Calls (in relation to embedding)
Projects
Develop a "Smart Destination Danube"
Climate Change Adaptation Conference
Preparatory study and International workshop on sewage sludge management (EU Green Week Partner Event)
New project proposals developments (tailing management facilities)
Initiating new projects in the field of disaster response
Online SG Meetings on Key Topics, very high interest also from "outside"
Organized stakeholders workshops, round table discussions
policy meetings
Recommendations for Decision-Makers and SMEs within the Danube Region with regard to Economic Impact of the Corona Crisis as implementetion of the general objective to support the competitiveness of SMEs in the DR
Thematic Workshops
Bilateral cooperation MD-At
Linking MRS activities with national activities in PA7 and with relevant international organisations like ICPDR
Required spetial text with committment on it on megotiation level
coordination at national level

Responses
Digitalization
BSF Young
Guidance Paper for Youth Participation
2 on line seminars organised in the frame of the DTP project for PACs supports held on 2021
Joint conference with SELEC on Anti Drug Trafficking
National climate plans
Expert workshops
Invest in sustainable quality products, services, innovative forms and infrastructure in the fields of tourism and culture, promote skills, education and creating jobs in the related areas
Conference about pharmaceuticals in water
Conference on Adaptation to Climate Change and Water
Disaster and civil protection activities
Improve the number of stakeholders
Regular EU DG Regio reports on implementation of MRS
policy papers
Flagship Danube Alliance as improvement of the interplay between clusters
Danube Region Monitor (publication)
Involvement 3rd PAC Ukraine
Show casing multi-annual strategic approach in PA1a (ministerial meeting cycle), PA8, PA10
reporting
lack of political support
Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week

Q12: To implement your job within the EUSDR more effectively, what changes in processes in your field of work would you recommend? (n=15)

Type of response	Responses by stakeholders in survey
Coordination, cooperation and networking at different levels	*'Closer cooperation between Strategy and Programme, and clear, successful, efficient implementation of the DTP capitalisation strategy.'* *'More space for direct networking and exchange, this has greatly suffered due to the pandemic.'* *'True embedding and coordination of implementation tasks at macro-regional level.'* *'Better coordination processes.'* *'Coordination between sectors from different fields.'*

Type of response	Responses by stakeholders in survey
	'Funded coordination platform for thematic project clusters.'
Less administrative burden	*'Firstly, to have as little administration as possible. Whenever the new template occurs, it should be as simple and short as possible. Reporting to DTP is smart, online, concise and clear. However, currently it has to be done twice a year. It would be helpful to have it only once a year.'* *Secondly, online meetings are perfect tool. They are cheap, comfortable and time saving. However, their number has increased considerably compared to personal meetings in the past. I would be good to have online meetings but with bearable frequency.'* *'More streamlined activities with less administration (e.g. monitoring, reporting).'* *'Simplification'*
Political will and commitment	*'More political will and support.'* *'More political weight.'* *'Better attendance in SGs.'*
Funding	*'Less bureaucratic funding for small-scale projects.'* *'More resources.'* *'More alignment of funding.'*
Communication and Visibility	*'Increase visibility of the Strategy, more political support on EU and international level.'* *'Better communication of results.'* *'Less communication for the sake of communicating.'* *'Aim for more 'inclusive' strategic targets / story lines at overall EUSDR level (going beyond annual work programmes of Presidencies); bridging with high-level EU agendas more.'*
Severe negative effect of COVID-19 on processes	*'I like my work but it was severely affected by covid 19 in terms of a lot of events were cancelled. This led to the fact that we spent a very few funds envisaged in our project with DTP and we are uncertain what and how we are going to plan under the next DTP programming period.'*

Question 15: What other positive or negative policy impacts of the EUSDR have you observed? (n=9)

Responses
Improved access to policy information for civil society organisations; better access to cooperation platforms for cities & municipalities; improved thematic multi-level governance dialogue/interactions; stronger awareness of civil society and local actors at national level.
Flagging intercultural competences as positive impact, negative impact of transnational cooperation is to find the common interest of all 14 regions/countries
Better discussion in preparation of with EU funding programmes; Better information dissemination on funding opportunities; Setting up stakeholder networks; Establishing cross-macroregional links
No negative impacts perceived; several concrete specific positive impacts which are hard to evaluate by percentage (extent) like in previous questions

EUSDR is considered increasingly in mainstream policies, e.g. in the ESF programming.
Stability and continuity in MRS cooperation; incl. base-funding for EUSDR governance
EUSDR has a complementary objectives
Coordination of national policies and funding
EUSDR has been key to mobilize and gather national / regional stakeholders with a clear interest in the region's development.

Q16: What needs to be changed to achieve more policy impact? and Q17 What needs to be changed to achieve more thematic impact? (n=10)

Type of response	Responses
Administrative culture, awareness on cooperation and strong political support	*'More cooperative administrative cultures that apply co-designing policies.'* *'Strong political support.'* *'To have more support on higher political level.'* *'More political ownership and recognition in all participating countries.'* *'Strong awareness raising for cross-border cooperation/administration.'*
Implementation and Funding	*'Strengthening capitalisation activities and linking them to project development activities.'* *'Steer the EUSDR more towards investment and policies instead of duplicating existing Interreg structures/Interreg mindset.'* *'Efforts on 'strategic embedding' of MRS'* *'Simplification of the processes'* *'Needs-based funding'* *'Small-scale grants/funding that is suitable for civil society organisations & cities/municipalities.'*
Relationship EU and with other macro-regional strategies	*'Closer cooperation with relevant EU bodies.'* *'Bridging (better and tailor-made) between EU agendas and national agendas.'* *'4 macro regional strategies cooperation.'*
Specific support for non-EU members	*'Capacity building for non-EU members'*
Coordination within EUSDR	*'A better overview about the successes of other PAC colleagues (especially across pillars).'* *'Closer cooperation with relevant organisations.'* *'Better cooperation with stakeholders and within the EUSDR.'*
Visibility of EUSDR	*'To increase visibility'* *'Clear strategic projects with a high visibility are still lacking.'*
Realistic expectations	*'Not to expect that every region will be fully included and interested.'*

Q17: What needs to be changed to achieve more thematic impact? (n=10)

Responses
strong awareness raising for cross-border cooperation/administration; small-scale grants/funding that is suitable for civil society organisations & cities/municipalities
Not to expect every region will be fully included and interested
closer cooperation with relevant organisations
Better cooperation with stakeholders and within the EUSDR.

answered previously (policy and thematic are connected)
We assume that this is identical to the policy impact, with policy fields being the content dimension of politics.
Bridging (better and tailor-made) between EU agendas and national agendas
Simplification of the processes
to increase visibility
Clear strategic projects with a high visibility are still lacking

Q20: How could the communication be made more effective in addressing the target group 'Institutional Government'? (n=10)

Responses
To rise the benefits of it
I dont know
Through join workshops, informal meetings.
with active communication: lobbying to decision makers and targeting key stakeholders - continuously "selling" EUSDR
I'm not expert on it
my subjective feeling is that maximum is being made
A wider understanding of "embdedding the EUSDR" would help, meaning that the EUSDR is increasingly considered in policy forums etc.
Linking into communication stratgeies of complementary insitutions
Communication is only one instrument of the marketing-mix
engaging more professionals when dealing with media and PR, also at the level of PACs

Question 24 Which narratives have been most successful in promoting the EUSDR? Which narrative do you find useful when communicating about the EUSDR? (n=8)

Responses
EUSDR = cooperation/coordination platform, where stakeholders from different levels & backgrounds come together to work on joint sokztions
Succesful stories of cooperation
10 years of EUSDR brochure
Lets make the Danube Region great again. One team, one stream. Prosperity through diversity.
Need for and potentials of more and a more-focussed macro-regional cooperation is in general obvious ("joint works better than alone" -> adapted to specific content/substance)
The excel table for transparency the annual EUSDR and joint-EUSDR-EC meeting

our common goal
Slogan "prosperity through diversity". Narrative of "togetherness"

Q28: Looking into the future, which thematic priorities should the EUSDR address that may not have been in focus so far? What should be modified in the Action Plan and when? (n=12)

Type of response	Responses
No change needed	*'All important thematic priorities are already addressed.'* *'The Action Plan is good as it is now for our priority area.'* *'From my point of view, I do not see a problem with the thematic priorities, only with the possibilities of fulfilment due to the political support and the associated financing (e.g. will to carry out embedding at national level). Political support/declarations should be linked to specific commitments, such as (concrete) sufficient capacities for administration - not sure if possible.'*
Slight modifications within PAs are required/have already been changed	*'EUSDR is on a good path with regards to Youth involvement. This should continue, necessary resources should be provided.'* *'Youth (NEETs), AP was recently modified and should also answer to long-term needs (as it is a strategy).'* *'Youth'.*
Important changes/modifications are required	*'In our field (energy) there are some emerging topics (also due to the pandemic) which are not in the Action Plan and should be incorporated.'* *'More focus on energy in general and its cooperation, knowledge and networking regarding job opportunities.'* *'AP of PA2 is slightly outdated due to the very fast changes in energy policy (e.g. Green Deal, Fit for 55 and other key documents were not even existing during the revision of the AP'.*
New themes/topics	*'Circular Economy.'*
More focus on horizontal objectives, integration of cross-cutting priorities	*'Horizontal issues should be strengthened.'* *'Horizontal topics.'* *'PA-cross cutting strategic story-lines/Agendas of relevance in the next decade and bridging towards relevant partners.'*
No opinion/ Not the right timing	*'It is a very difficult question. The start of the implementation of the Action Plan was actually severely impeded by the outbreak of the pandemic.'* *'it is too early to make any changes; we have been 'fighting' for the revised EUSDR Actions, targets, projects and processes for so long that it makes yet no sense for our PA.'* *'N/A'*

Q29: What kind of support would you like to receive from other core EUSDR stakeholders in order to better implement the Strategy/the revised EUSDR Action Plan? (n=15)

Type of response	Responses by stakeholders in survey
Stronger embedding into national/regional/local processes, policies and programmes	*'Stronger promotion of topics at national/regional/local level/support in mobilising stakeholders at (sub-)national level.'* *'Successfully finished process of embedding MRS into main EU programmes would be of benefit for all.'* *'Stronger cooperation with MA.'*
Support to PAC	*'Maybe the PAC teams need a special training is acquiring more skills related to preparing policy documents, writing strategic reports etc. In this regard, the experience of the DSP is valuable. They produce very wise reports. Sometimes they delegated these tasks to external contractors like the summary of the current survey but this is also useful - how to prepare a term of reference in order to task an external contract with a certain task related to a certain priority area.'* *'No overlapping monitoring/reporting, no red tape.'* *'PACs should receive more administrative support and less bureaucratic burden.'* *'Continuation of DSP'.*
More and better networking at all levels	*'Higher activity, cooperation and sharing their contacts.'* *'Improve project networking - partner search, since projects are effective tool in Danube Region development.'* *'Better coordination of processes.'* *'Active cooperation.'*
EC involvement and support	*'European Commission and line DGs should be involved more and they should support the implementation of the Strategy in a more efficient way.'* *'More attention at EU level would support the work of the macro-region.'*

Annex IV Interviewees

1. Ms Tatjana Kralj, Croatian NC and 2020 EUSDR Presidency, Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds of Croatia on 4 November 2021
2. Ms Baiba Liepa and Ms Ilze Ciganska, Interact, on 11 November 2021
3. Mr František Koločány, Slovak NC and 2021 EUSDR Presidency, Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of Slovakia on 26 November 2021
4. Ms Claudia Singer, EU Funding Agency/City of Vienna, and Ms Ana Novak, Centre for European Perspective, PAC PA 10, on 26 November 2021
5. Ms Katharina Lenz, EUSDR Pillar Officer (Pillars 1 & 4) on 1 December 2021
6. Ms Mihaela Florea, EUSDR Pillar Officer (Pillars 2 & 3) on 7 December 2021
7. Mr Johan Magnusson, European Commission, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), Unit D.1 - Macro-regions, Transnational, Interregional Cooperation, IPA, Enlargement on 4 February 2022
8. Ms Nicole Hauder, Ms Katharina Lenz, Mr Robert Lichtner, Ms Andreea Pena, Ms Mihaela Florea, Ms Andreea Stoenescu, Ms Anamaria Dunca, Ms Helene Schabasser, Danube Strategy Point, on 8 February 2022
9. Mr Franc Žepič, Ministry of Infrastructure, Slovenia, PAC PA 1B, on 10 March 2022
10. Ms Anna Gherganova, Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection of Moldova and Mr Roland Hanak, Federal Ministry of Labour of Austria, PAC PA 9, on 10 March 2022
11. Ms Judit Schrick-Szenczi, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Housing Baden-Württemberg, Germany and Ms Nirvana Kapitan Butković, Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Crafts of Croatia, PAC PA 8, on 15 March 2022
12. Mr László Balatonyi, Directorate General of Water Management of Hungary and Mr Gheorghe Constantin, Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests of Romania, PAC PA 5, on 15 March 2022

Annex V Interactions between the key EUSDR stakeholder categories

Stakeholder 1	Stakeholder 2	Interaction	Findings
Danube Strategy Point	**National Coordinators**	• Technical facilitation and support of preparation of NC meetings by DSP in cooperation with the Presidency • Technical facilitation and support of preparation of NC-PAC meetings by DSP in cooperation with the Presidency • institutional memory: safeguarding/provision of all relevant documentation and reporting (e.g. of EC and DTP) • DSP to provide NCs with all relevant information upon request • Support of DSP upon request on national events and implementation activities under the mandate of the incumbent presidency • DSP provides the results of the monitoring (reporting on the progress and achievements of the PAs) to the NCs in consolidated outputs • Consultations on various matters • Minutes/reports taking at meetings • Regular consultation on state of the art of implementation of MRS in different member states under the mandate of the incumbent presidency, e.g. in regard to embedding • Requests by NCs for information to DSP • DSP updates information on homepage/mailing list/app/contact list on appointed NC coordinators • DSP supports NCs and Trio Presidency in reporting to the HLG under the mandate of the incumbent presidency • DSP to provide information on implementation of other MRS	The interactions between the **DSP** and **National Coordinators** are manifold, and key to the functioning of the Strategy, with the DSP being the key support body for NCs meetings and information provision. The survey, document analysis as well as the interviews did so far not reveal specific problems. Rather there is a sense that the Austrian-Romanian DSP is running smoothly and supportively.

Danube Strategy Point	**Priority Area Coordinator**	• Technical facilitation and support of preparation of NC-PAC meetings by DSP in coordination with the Presidency • Technical facilitation and support of preparation of PAC meetings by DSP in coordination with the Presidency • Technical support of PAC activities upon request in any implementation activities, such as events or workshops, SG meeting organisation • Support in SG meeting organisation, and participation of DSP in all SG meetings with presentations on the EUSDR updates and DSP activities • DSP collects inputs of PACs for EC MRS implementation report via the reporting tool • DSP collects DTP reports from PACs • DSP consults PACs on regular developments or documents • DSP to monitor developments in different PAs and of the Strategy implementation more broadly via the reporting tool. • PACs to provide input to DSP communication activities • Facilitate preparation of and the conduction of sessions and workshops several times a year and in the Annual Forum/a • DSP may forward information from PACs to NCs and EC upon request • DSP to provide information on implementation of other MRS on PA level / Supports the exchange with other MRS • DSP elevates synergies by cooperation of different PACs • DSP support PACs in the embedding process and provides them with funding opportunities (in cooperation with EuroAccess)	The **DSP** and the **PACs** are also in very close contact, with the DSP being the key support for PACs, e.g., in collecting and distributing information among the stakeholders. The DSP supports the PACs in organising SG meetings and thematic events, develops workshops dedicated to the PACs and conducts different other activities in accordance with the mandate given by the NCs (streamlining communication, collecting the input on specific topics, conducting capacity building activities etc). This is also reflected by the online survey where most PACs suggest being at least 1-2 hours per week allocating to activities related to coordination with the DSP. Please, see Table 4-2. It is evident that the DSP is the key interlocutor for PACs with other stakeholders, e.g., in view of specifically supporting the SG meetings (preparations) or stakeholder conferences/seminars as well as in view of tasks as mandated by the Presidency as well as with the, NCs, or the EC.

Danube Strategy Point	**EUSDR (TRIO) Presidency**	• Facilitation, documentation and technical support to organizing Annual Fora, NC, PAC and NC-PAC meetings • DSP technically supports the Holding of TRIO PCY meetings (incl. DSP, EC) • Support to all Presidency activities, specifically the coordination role that presidencies have with NCs and PACs • Support of the incumbent EUSDR PCY in the organisation of the ministerial meeting at the AF (incl. the ministerial declaration) and supporting the relevant coordination activities • Support of the DSP for the presidency in preparation the report at the HLG • information and capacity building of presidency tasks upon request • Support in communication activities of Presidency	The **(TRIO) Presidency** works on a rotating principle, which suggests that the **DSP** is crucial for ensuring consistency in processes across the different Presidencies and keeps record of activities. The relationships seem to work well. Interviews with Presidency representatives revealed that the support of the DSP is valued. Reading between the lines of interview statements, it became also evident that the Presidency requires substantial human resources, which may not always be available on the national level. As a result, the support of the DSP is considered a crucial element.
Danube Strategy Point	**High Level Group**	• Support of the DSP for the presidency in preparation the report at the HLG • HLG can invite DSP as observer	The **DSP's** direct contact with the **HLG** seems limited, and mainly based on preparatory activities to the Presidency.
Danube Strategy Point	**Steering Groups**	• Technical facilitation of Steering Group meetings upon request, participation in SG meetings • Presentation of latest developments within EUSDR at SG meetings • Support of events of the SG or in Taskforces or Workgroups DSP to keep record of SG Members and update on EUSDR website/contact list/app accordingly	The interactions between the **DSP** and different **SGs** may well differ as per its mandate the DSPs direct support focusses on the PAC level. However, overall, the DSPs is in direct contact with PACs throughout the year, e.g., in support of SG meetings and regularly participates in SG meetings and in some cases support the SG meetings technical preparation. The DSP also facilitates PAs activities, or events by Task Forces or Working Groups.
Danube Strategy Point	**European Commission**	• EC: Coordination of EU MRS Week, support of DSP to collect information • DSP: Support to the EC to collection of Inputs to EC MRS implementation report via the reporting tool	The **DSP** is also a key interlocutor between the Strategy and the **EC**, as the DSP is collecting relevant information, and participates in most meetings of the (TRIO) Presidency with the EC.

		• Coordination with EC and EUSDR Presidency on programme of the Annual Forum • Provides information to the EC upon request • Regular consultation • Upon request support of EC by DSP in forwarding information of EC To EUSDR stakeholders DSP to support DG REGIO in reaching out to relevant line DGs • DSP invites to NC-PAC meetings on behalf of the incumbent EUSDR presidency. • Preparatory exchanges and coordination between DSP and EC in view of meetings.	
National Coordinators	**Priority Area Coordinators**	• Joint (biannual) PAC-NC meetings • Information on PAC activities to NCs via DSP and vice versa • In case of need coordination of PACs and NCs on activities. • PACs inform NCs about activities in their thematic field relevant to the NCs country and vice versa	The **NCs** and **PACs** are both key implementers of the Strategy. Formally, they meet at least once a year at the joint NC-PAC meetings and are relevant for all strategic decision-makings in the Strategy. They also meet in TASK-FORCE groups and the SG Danuval. Overall, however, given how crucial both stakeholder groups are, the direct contact between these two stakeholder groups seems rather limited and outside of the regular joint meetings mostly to stem from written communication or reports. The joint meetings are of a structured nature, that aims to run through the different points on the agenda. The consultations of the evaluation team with EUSDR stakeholders suggested, however, that some stakeholders, that asked to for this to be off the record or if we deem it interesting to refer to this anonymously, would consider that more time for exchange, and joint productive time could be useful.
National Coordinators	**Steering Groups**	• Some NCs have a country specific platform and organisation to keep in touch with respective Steering Group members	**NCs** are in contact mostly with their national **SG representatives**, rather than that they are in touch with the Steering Groups directly. Each country has

		• Coordination of thematic activities and support in relation to funding of projects between SG members and NCs (only in very few countries/on certain topics) • SG in coordination with PACs submit policy proposals and suggestions for Action Plan to NCs (if there is a revision process of the AP)	their own national platforms and established consultation processes. The contacts between NCs and SG members differ via country. However, overall, the participation of SG members in the SG meetings continues to be a matter of concern in some PAs. NCs play a crucial role to facilitate inter-ministerial coordination and inform SG members on broader developments.
National Coordinators	**European Commission**	• Input to EC MRS Implementation report via TRIO Presidency • NCs inform their respective HLG members (if they are not the same person) about updates, with the group being headed by DG REGIO • EC to attend NC meetings • Coordinate with EC on embedding (e.g. in the Task Force EUSDR EMB-DR) • NC provides relevant information to EC which has an overview on the relevant information on priorities for embedding in view of the internal coordination in the EC between D1 and geographical units	The **NCs** and the **EC** are key to ensure that a political dynamic of the EUSDR is maintained both at the EU as well as the national levels. In this process, the (TRIO) Presidencies play a critical role in taking over the formal communication of agreed positions of the NCs of the EUSDR, and the daily dealings with the EC,—such as preparation of the Ministerial Declarations for the Annual Fora. These processes are supported by the DSP. As for the Ministerial Declarations, interviewees consider these Declarations important, yet, some expressed that these could incorporate more ambitious goals for the EUSDR future agendas.
National Coordinators	**High Level Group**	• Input to EUSDR Presidency Reporting to HLG • In some cases, the NCs are also the representatives of their states in the HLG	The **HLG** meets once a year, and is a group that brings together representatives from all MRS. The **NCs** are often also the representatives of member states at the HLG.
National Coordinators	**EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies**	• NCs are key persons when country has the EUSDR presidency • Presidency to represent the NCs at the European political level • Provide information to EUSDR Presidency via DSP for the Presidencies reflection presented in the HLG meeting • Support of Presidency in Annual Fora preparation • Presidency organises at least one annual NC meeting and one NC-PAC meeting and one PAC meeting in coordination with DSP	The **EUSDR** (TRIO) **Presidencies** are usually headed by the **NCs** of the respective country. The understanding of the evaluation team is that the Presidency acts as spokesperson for the NCs, and as such the Presidencies need to coordinate their diverse views. Overall, the Presidencies themselves reflect positively on the cooperation with the NCs,

			which due to the pandemic has mostly moved to virtual space.
Priority Area Coordinators	**High Level Group**	• No direct contact • Provide information to DSP, TRIO Presidencies and NCs for reporting to HLG	The **PACs** and the **HLG** have no direct contact throughout the year. However, HLG national representatives may consult with their national PACs prior to the HLG meetings.
Priority Area Coordinators	**EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies**	• PACs occasionally may provide information via DSP upon request of the Presidency on current activities • Suggest and conduct workshops at Annual Forum and thematic coordination throughout the year (with respective PAs concerned by PCY priorities) • Presidency to facilitate PAC-NC meetings • Presidency to facilitate PAC meetings	The **PACs** and the **(TRIO) Presidencies** are also not often directly in contact, apart from the organisation of the Annual Forum and the consultation on thematic priorities for Presidencies. Most of the information is collected by the DSP and forwarded to the Presidency. They meet at the joint PAC-NC meetings, organised by the Presidency with the support of the DSP. One such example where direct contact existed was where the Slovak Presidency sought direct contact with for example PA10 to learn from their experience in the Youth Agenda.
Priority Area Coordinators	**European Commission**	• Input to EC MRS Implementation report via EUSDR reporting tool • Invitation of relevant contact persons in DG REGIO and line DGs to Steering Group Meetings; presentation of EC at the SG meetings • Coordination of communication activities • Coordination of EUSDR activities and projects in view of funding of projects through EU funding streams	The **PACs** and **EC** are closely connected. Many PACs deem it crucial to maintain a good relationship with relevant representatives of the European Commission, and specifically have EC line DGs present and actively participating at SG meetings and supporting SG activities. This relationship is considered crucial to link the thematic activities with relevant sector policies and funding at the EU level. The role of the EC is at times at the EU level

			underestimated, and PACs as well as SG members may wish some more engagement and broader support by line DGs.
Priority Area Coordinators	**Steering Groups**	• PACs coordinate activities in own PA as well as communicate across PAs • PACs to organise SG meetings in their own PA • SG members to report on activities in national contexts (e.g. in SG meetings) • SG members to provide input to PACs in view of reporting periods • Regular ad-hoc coordination between SG Members and PACs • PACs to keep SG members informed on broader developments • Decide on strategic orientation of own PA, and coordination with other PAs • SG members via PACs provide inputs for Action Plan revision (if there is a revision process of the AP) • Identification of actions / projects to be included in the Action Plan • Preparing and regularly updating the Roadmap of Actions of the Priority Area • PACs together with their SGs ensure effective embedding into the various national contexts / identification of relevant funding sources for the actions/projects selected • preparing meetings of relevant line ministers in cooperation with the NCs • identify progress related to the progress in actions and projects and achievement of targets • PACs are in charge of setting up appropriate operational working structures, best suited to implement the actions, to agree on a work programme between the stakeholders involved and to trace progress achieved. For these tasks, PA sub-groups can be installed, such as working groups, task forces or advisory bodies around sub-themes.	The relationship between **PACs** and **SGs** is obvious, with SGs being the decision-making body for the respective Priority Areas, and the PACs coordinating the respective workplans. The PACs are also crucial in organising the meetings and considering different national standpoints in view of proposed actions and priorities. However, it has to be noted, that PACs at times would wish SG members to be more initiative and active in their own national contexts in promoting the EUSDR activities. For some countries and PAs the participation of national representatives at SG meetings remains a point of concern.

EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies	**Steering Groups**	• Incoming presidencies may attend SG Meetings to present their programmes	There is little direct connection between the (TRIO) **Presidencies** and the **SGs** activities. However, presidencies reported that they consult the SGs in view of topics they would wish to address at the Annual Forum. There have been no signs that this is a problem or that additional processes would need to be established.
EUSDR (TRIO) Presidency	**High-level Group**	• The EUSDR Presidencies present the EUSDR NCs at the HLG collects inputs from NCs for report to HLG	The **EUSDR Presidency** represents the EUSDR at the **HLG** meeting and is responsible to take overall concerns forward to the HLG, such as for example concerns on challenges identified in the embedding process or the current youth agenda.
EUSDR (TRIO) Presidency	**European Commission**	• Cooperation and Coordination between the EC and the Presidencies • Joint organisation of the Annual Forum • Coordination of political representation at Annual Fora (e.g. prime ministers and Commissioners) • Coordination on Presidency priorities • Presidency coordinates inputs to the EC MRS implementation report with support of the DSP	Throughout the (TRIO) **Presidency** the contacts with the **European Commission** are manifold, and concern a variety of coordination activities, with a close coordination in view of the Annual Forum. The DSP is a crucial interlocutor and supports the EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies in their coordination with the EC.
Steering Groups	**High-level Group**	• HLG representatives, which in some states may also be the NCS, may consult with the SG members from their countries in preparation of the HLG meeting	There is no formalised process between the **SGs** and **HLG**. However, in many countries national representatives consult with SG members.
European Commission	**High-level Group**	• EC organises the HLG meeting through the DG REGIO • EC prepares programmes and invites representative	The **European Commission** is the organiser of the **HLG**, which offers an option to place key concerns of the EC directly to the National Coordinators and Member States. Past examples include the importance given to the embedding strategies and the 2021-2027 programming period.

Annex VI Key changes in governance and processes

Change	Description	Findings
Introduction of the (new) DSP in 2018	The first representation at the Baden-Württemberg representation to the EU in Brussels, starting its work in May 2015[53] and being active till 2017, was a key addition to the EUSDR architecture. After its discontinuation a new Danube Strategy Point was established, located in Vienna and Bucharest. With the new DSP being implemented in Vienna and Bucharest in September 2018 the communication channels between the different governance elements have been streamlined, with the DSP being the key point of contact for all of them and supporting in the collection of relevant information.	**The introduction of the DSP, and the functioning of the DSP has been largely considered as a positive development** across interviewees and survey respondents. It was highlighted that the DSP is very efficient and a good support to all government bodies. Overall, the current functioning of the DSP is considered an added value to the EUSDR, with the DSP occupying a key role in the EUSDR processes. In view of the development and implementation of the new AP, the DSP has been considered as crucial in developing the AP and putting together the consolidated input of the PACs. Further in view of the implementation of the AP, the new monitoring tool will help. Further the DSP is supporting some PACs in organisation of SG or Task Force meetings, as well as that it takes over communication tasks of the new AP. In view of an overall appreciation, interviewees raised no fundamental concerns. A minor comment was that the DSP is nowadays so central to the EUSDR that some may wonder if it has received too much competence. The DSP when asked in the interview, noted that indeed they keep strictly to the task assigned to them. However, at times it may be that in the large amount of information received by respondents, these may at times not be remembered at all stages. A key finding was that despite the existence of the governance architecture finding, the limits of the role of the DSP may not always be clear, or with PACs suggesting that in view of the human resources the DSP is comparatively well equipped.
Introduction of the DTP	When the South East Europe transnational programme became the **Danube Transnational Programme** (DTP) reflecting the territorial coverage of the EU Danube Region Strategy, PACs were funded, DTP increasing its connections with the macro-regional stakeholders. An example is the Annual Event of DTP which is part of the EUSDR Annual Forum and the financing of this big event.[54] The reporting of PACs to the DTP is a key element for the future monitoring system.	The closer links between the DTP and the EUSDR, through e.g. the financing of the PACs as a project is considered fundamental to today's functioning of the EUSDR. In view of the implementation of the new Action Plan, the milestones to be delivered for the DTP complement the operationalisation of the Action Plan. It has been suggested that in future it is key, specifically for countries with little ministerial budget for travelling that the PACs can visit EUSDR related activities in view of strategically developing projects. Overall, also the increased coordination with the DTP and reporting activities to the DTP seem to be valued by the EUSDR stakeholders.

[53] Opening of the first EUSDR Danube Strategy Point: https://www.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/presse/pressemitteilung/pid/eroeffnung-des-danube-strategy-point/?type=

[54] See for example the News on the DTP Annual Event as part of the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum: available under: https://www.interreg-danube.eu/news-and-events/programme-news-and-events/6846

Change	Description	Findings
Introduction of the TRIO Presidencies and rule for order of the EUSDR	The introduction of **TRIO Presidencies** with a joint work programme aimed to ensure a better continuation of key topics, as exemplified by the debate around embedding. The TRIO Presidencies got more important especially since 2019. The introduction of the TRIO Presidencies also facilitated the first Non-EU Member States Presidency in 2021-2022: Ukraine. A key topic is embedding, even though it is less relevant for Ukraine, and was supported by the TRIO states. Since the invasion of Ukraine State to take over the Presidency, the two TRIO Presidency countries (Slovakia and Slovenia) agreed to step in according to the Rules of Procedure, to take over the Presidency duties for the time being and act as temporary Presidency. No new actions will be initiated, but those agreed up until the last NC meeting on 22 February will be followed up by the temporary Presidency. According to the updated Rules of Procedure for the NC meetings approved under the Croatian Presidency in 2020, a new rule for the order of the EUSDR Presidencies was introduced, which suggests that an alphabetical order shall be followed, avoiding the search for countries willing to take the lead.	The well-functioning of the TRIO Presidencies was confirmed in the interviews, and the support of the DSP to the Presidencies was considered as helpful. Overall, all interviews with presidencies suggested indeed through the organisation in TRIOs consistency and longer-term work programmes have been facilitated. The invasion of Ukraine, is one – though horrid - example of how the organisation of the Presidencies in TRIO allows to react to unforeseen circumstances as well as that it creates loyalty among Member States and responsibilities to step in. On 23rd of March 2022 the EUSDR National Coordinators in a written procedure formally endorsed the instalment of a Temporary EUSDR Presidency to be held by the remaining members of the TRIO - the National Coordinators of Slovakia and Slovenia, supported by the Danube Strategy Point. For the time being, the Temporary EUSDR Presidency takes over the EUSDR Presidency's duties and tasks until the Ukrainian National Coordination informs otherwise. Further in view of the integration of Non-EU Member States, the support of member states has been important to take on such a role. Apart from the TRIO, Hungary for example also supported Ukraine's onboarding and the work of the embedding. Beyond the functioning of the EUSDR the cooperation thus contributes to a wider knowledge exchange and experience creation. The importance paid to the TRIOs has also become evident in the EUSDR governance visualisation at the EUSDR homepage. The clear order of who will be taking over the Presidency when, allows for a smooth transition and clear distribution of tasks, ensuring that also in future further Non EU Member States will be taking over the Presidencies. This change was initiated under the Croatian Presidency, indicating the contemporary changes the governance structure is undergoing. From a broader scientific perspective these developments are also an example for a certain "hardening" of the soft and more experimental nature of MRS.
Increased importance paid to partnership on equal footing	This is illustrated by an increased inclusion of non-EU countries participating in the EUSDR in the governance structure. One key change was the more recent **inclusion of Ukrainian and Montenegro representatives in the PACs structure in terms of PA coordination**[55]. The PA 1B is now supported by Ukraine, the contribution of which will remain to be seen in light of current developments. The PAC team for PA 3 now includes Montenegro, and the PAC team for PA 9 now includes Ukraine. The 2021 **AF** also highlighted the role of the EUSDR in the **Western Balkans**, with a	On page 8 the AP states: "Overall, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region has a crucial role in the deepening of EU integration, collaborating with candidate countries, and enhancing cooperation with non-EU neighbours, which has become even more important for Ukraine since 2014. Actions in the EUSDR shall consider the whole Danube Region including rural and mountain areas", the current developments even more so underline the role of EU Integration in the region, with new dynamics to be expected. The AP directly links to the annexation of the Crim, highlighting the presence of armed conflicts in the region and the role the EUSDR collaboration plays for cooperation. As pointed out in the EUSDR AP on p. 7 the geopolitical context plays a substantial role, and the AP can contribute to a "greater

[55] The implications of the invasion of Russia of Ukraine as it is happening at the moment of writing for the PAC Teams remains to be seen. It is too early to comment

Change	Description	Findings
	dedicated session in the programme on the topic of 'Support to non-EU states & Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans'. Another event, that is deemed to further illustrate this development, is that for the first time Ukraine being a non-EU member state and non-accession country is taking the **EUSDR Presidency in 2022** (see above). The significance of this step was highlighted in the Annual Forum during the handover of the 'steering wheel'[56].	picture". This includes the mentioning of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea Synergy, as well as the Three Seas Initiative. It has become obvious that since the new Action Plan increased attention has been paid to the partnership on equal footing principle. The increased relationship with the EUSDR non-EU member states over the last years was deemed as a success in the interviews. Overall, during the implementation of the new AP the collaboration between EU and non-EU member states has become more visible, both through changes in the governance structure as well as through more recent projects. Altogether these initiatives support the achievement of supporting EU Enlargement Policy Provisions, as well as EU Neighbourhood Policy Provision.
Embedding Activities	In view of the new funding period, efforts to **embed the EUSDR priorities** in national strategies and funding streams have increased substantially since 2019.	The importance of the embedding strategies as a key is confirmed by the interviews, the dominance of the topic in the High-Level Group (HLG) meetings, specifically in the three HLG meetings since 2020, the TRIO Presidency meetings or the three EU MRS Weeks. Overall, interviews suggest that progress in embedding activities of the EUSDR goals as outlined in the new AP is being made.
Introduction of the SG Danuval	In 2018, when the process of the development of the new EUSDR AP started, the SG Danuval was introduced to ensure coordination of the evaluation activities. The Group is composed of the TRIO Presidencies, one PAC per Pillar, representatives from the EC, DTP, ESPON as well as interested NCs (Hungary and Austria).	The new SG Danuval allows for a facilitated review of the evaluation activities.
Development of cross-MRS support and coordination:	The **High-Level Group on MRS**, which brings together representatives from all MRS member states, continues to facilitate a cross-MRS coordination with the EC, and has expanded its role after the initial key role being the endorsement of MRS before the European Council's endorsements. **INTERACT** has taken an active role in supporting the development of macro-regional strategies, with the cross-**MRS capacity building group founded in February 2018** as a core forum of exchange between the MRS stakeholders. The group remained very active, and has in the timeframe relevant for this evaluation since April 2020, continued a strong cross-macro-regional coordination in the fields of embedding, roles and responsibilities as well as monitoring. In 2017 Slovenia initiated the first **macro-regional communication conference**, which set the goal to present a horizontal media/communication pillar. In September 2019 a second forum on communicating MRS was held again in Slovenia. Further events were held in September 2020 and November 2021.	The development of different cross-MRS support mechanisms has become more obvious in the last three years. While the HLG on MRS exists since a long while, during the last years its role in keeping an eye on the embedding activities was deemed important. In view of the development of the new AP, the MRS group allowed for exchange with other macro-regions. In addition, the MRS capacity building group allowed for the development of a joint narrative of macro-regions. The conferences on macro-regional communication, were deemed successful enough to be repeated annually. Its initiation also aligns with the start on the discussions of a new AP, and contributed to the communication of the new AP. The EU MRS week, the newest mechanism of cross-MRS support and collaboration is organised by the European Commission, and focusses every year on specific topics. Thus, the MRS Week allows for a knowledge exchange on the ways each of the MRS tackles the topics at hand. It provides a key exchange opportunity for EU MRS stakeholders across Europe, as often MRS stakeholders visit their own Annual Forum, but do not otherwise have the opportunity to learn from other MRS. In 2022, the event happened shortly after the invasion of Ukraine,

[56] See for example the report of the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum: available under: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/10th-EUSDR-Annual-Forum-Comprehensive-Summary-Report.pdf

Change	Description	Findings
	In 2020 the first **EU MRS Week** was introduced, and after a successful first edition, implemented in its 2nd edition in March 2021. The MRS week allows macro-regions to exchange, coordinate and cooperate. The 2021 edition tackled the topic of *Reconnect, Rethink, Recover* including embedding. In March 2022 the third edition was held with the motto *Engage, Empower, Evolve* centred on three topics of Youth, European Green Deal and Social Innovation.	which of course changed the opening statements, and led to a solidarity announcement of all MRS.

Annex VII Remarks on the first draft of the monitoring tool

Since the first interview between the evaluation team and the DSP, the EUSDR monitoring system has been adjusted. Following the recommendations from the interim report, many suggestions were already taken up in the current form of the reporting template. In mid-March the evaluation team was updated of the new PA reporting and received comments by the DSP on the adjustments in view of the below outlined commentary on individual sections. Consequently, this Annex lists the previous comments that were provided in written and verbally for documentation. Due to very close timeframe towards the submission of the draft final report a more detailed analysis of the new form was not possible, but we have taken up a short comment under each section of how it has been taken up based in information provided by the DSP. For the next reporting, foreseen in 2024, some remarks maybe still relevant, but it may be useful to implement the monitoring in a first round in 2022.

Previous comments

1. Main achievements in the Reporting Period

- If technically possible, it would be better if the structure of the Action Plan could already be provided in the online tool, which would facilitate the identification of actions in view of the Action Plan for both, analytical purposes as well as for the PACs filling in the questionnaire.
- The section asks for added-value of the activities, whereas it may be interesting to ask for the foreseen long-term impact of these activities, and potentially ask for challenges in the implementation.
- Further sections are largely based on the four DTP reporting periods. In the end, the questionnaire asks for a summary of the information and linking it to the overall strategic approach of the PA. Even though these questions are not mandatory, they may be considered as a burden by the PACs. It could be considered to ask for highlights of activities or key reflections on the activities.
- In support to the communication activities, the survey could rephrase the question on the carried-out activities and ask for the most successful messages or key slogans that were used in promotion activities.

Response by DSP:

The structure of the AP has been taken up in the report. The DSP continued to use the word of added- value as it is broader, but may reconsider in 2024. The survey was reduced in terms of numbers of questions as per the suggestion in this part. The final suggestion could not be taken up as the question stems from the EC questionnaire.

2. Specific Horizontal and cross-cutting activities

- This section has several open fields to be filled in. This could be revisited after the first monitoring attempt to learn and provide a pre-set of answers that can be built on in the following years.
- The question on progress made in cross-cutting issues in comparison to other reporting periods, may be a difficult question to answer, as it is unclear what progress is. Thus, the answers that may

be provided by the stakeholders can differ and not be comparable. One may consider taking up a scale that would allow to judge how satisfied PACs are with the progress made, or what is their assessment of achievements.

Response by DSP:

The use of open questions will be revisited. The second suggestion was taken up, and the question was deleted. The involvement of other PAs is now included in another section.

3. Capitalisation

The questions asking to describe the results briefly, may in practice be answered very short and little informative. Potentially it may be worthwhile to only ask for describing around one project or activity, that the PACs deem worthwhile showcasing.

Response by DSP:

This will be revisited in the next reporting phase.

4. Funding

In order to better understand which funding sources where used, it may be practical in the question 4.2 to offer different answering opportunities under each funding stream to allow for multiple-choice. Specifically, the use of national programmes or private funds are funding sources that the EUSDR aims to increasingly make use of. The question 4.2. asks three questions in one, which may lead to the second question on what should be done to promote other sources not to be answered. In addition, this may also be a challenge to answer for PACs as there may be many projects funded that are of relevance for the EUSDR from other sources, but PACs may not know about them, or they may not be directly linked to the EUSDR.

Response by DSP:

The suggestion on splitting the question has been taken up, and the suggestion on further funding sources will be revisited in the next reporting period.

5. Cooperation with EUSDR Main stakeholders

The question is difficult to answer, as too many understandings of how to answer a 'how' question are possible. This question may also be deemed a challenge to answer as individual stakeholders may not feel comfortable to report on the cooperation with other stakeholders in a way that would provide a form of a written judgement. If it is a description of the type of activities, it may be considered to provide multiple-choice answer options, such as contact via e-mail, regular meetings, or similar. In addition, one could ask for best practice-cases of cooperation instead or ask with whom stakeholders would wish to engage more depth.

Response by DSP:

Examples were added in the section on type of activities, which provides clarification. New questions haven't been taken up in view of the length of the questionnaire.

6. Steering Group.

The section on SGs could be structured around factual questions, on how often and through which format the SG meetings are being held. In addition, it may be interesting to ask how often PACs and NCs are in contact with SG members outside of the SG meetings.

Response by DSP:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the online activities, the DSP has already a goof overview. More factual questions may thus become more relevant post Covid.

7. Involvement and Cooperation with Other Stakeholders

The predefined answers could include 'conversation or contact for information exchange'. Many contacts may not lead to direct cooperation, and these activities cannot be captured at the moment.

Response by DSP:

The suggestion was taken on board.

8. Policy Development

This section is key to estimate impact of the EUSDR, yet it may be interesting to combine it with the achievements section. To facilitate analysis, one may ask which policy fields were addressed in the reporting period primarily.

Response by DSP:

To the length of the achievement section, the DSP prefers to keep it as a separate one.

9. Opportunities and Challenges

This section may also be merged with other sections, e.g., the good practice question could be incorporated in the first section.

Response by DSP:

This will be reconsidered in 2024 depending on the European Commission's question for the MRS implementation report.

The more general remarks were:

- A key remark made both in interviews as well as in open sections of the online survey, was that **administrative procedures shall be kept to a minimum**. This is not a new concern of MRS stakeholders, while it is acknowledged that reporting is must. Overall stakeholders, and specifically

PACs, have already since a long period suggested that simplification is needed, and that reporting shall be kept to a minimum, at the same time making clear the purpose and further use of the inquiry. The new tool has the opportunity to provide the awaited simplification of reporting as it brings together several previous reporting requirements. Yet, the size of the questionnaire in the new monitoring tool is likely to raise concerns among PACs. This has also been confirmed in the first round of comments on the proposed new tool. In its current form the monitoring survey is deemed to be too lengthy and time demanding for PACs to complete. While one survey every other year might not be considered as a too big burden, the number of questions, especially, the open-phrased ones may reduce the willingness of stakeholders to provide the relevant information in the expected depth. It has to be noted that some questions have already been taken out based on the information provided orally by the DSP, and that the DSP will support the PACs by already including the answers provided in the DTP report into the file. This already addresses some of the concerns of stakeholders.

Response by DSP:

The number of questions has been reduced substantially, and it has been outlined that the DSP will prepopulate certain sections for the PACs, already alleviating the anxiety of PACs that it will become a cumbersome tool. The evaluation team agrees.

- The **structure of the monitoring** tool in nine sections covers relevant sections for a monitoring, but due to its presentation underlines the lengthiness of the survey. One can consider including topics such as policy development in the section of main achievement.

Response by DSP:

The structure was kept, but this topic can be revisited in 2024

- A challenge of the design of the monitoring tool in its current form is, that it does not facilitate in all cases to **link the activities** undertaken **with the revised Action Plan 2020** and to provide an easy judgement on the achievements in regard to the individual actions per PA.

- Response by DSP:

This has been changed and taken up.

Overall commentary from the Interim report:

- The monitoring tool allows for understanding the diversity of activities that the MRS stakeholders are working on, and as such is deemed to be valuable for the overall EUSDR. In view of the evaluation question asked: How practicable and efficient the planned monitoring system is, the initial judgement of the evaluators in the interim report was that it provided a good basis, but that some further streamlining and shortening may be needed to use it more effectively.

- Due to the large number of open-ended questions, it will be difficult to compare whether the satisfaction of PACs has changed between different reporting periods. In its current state the questionnaire runs the risk that stakeholders may answer in very few words to the numerous open

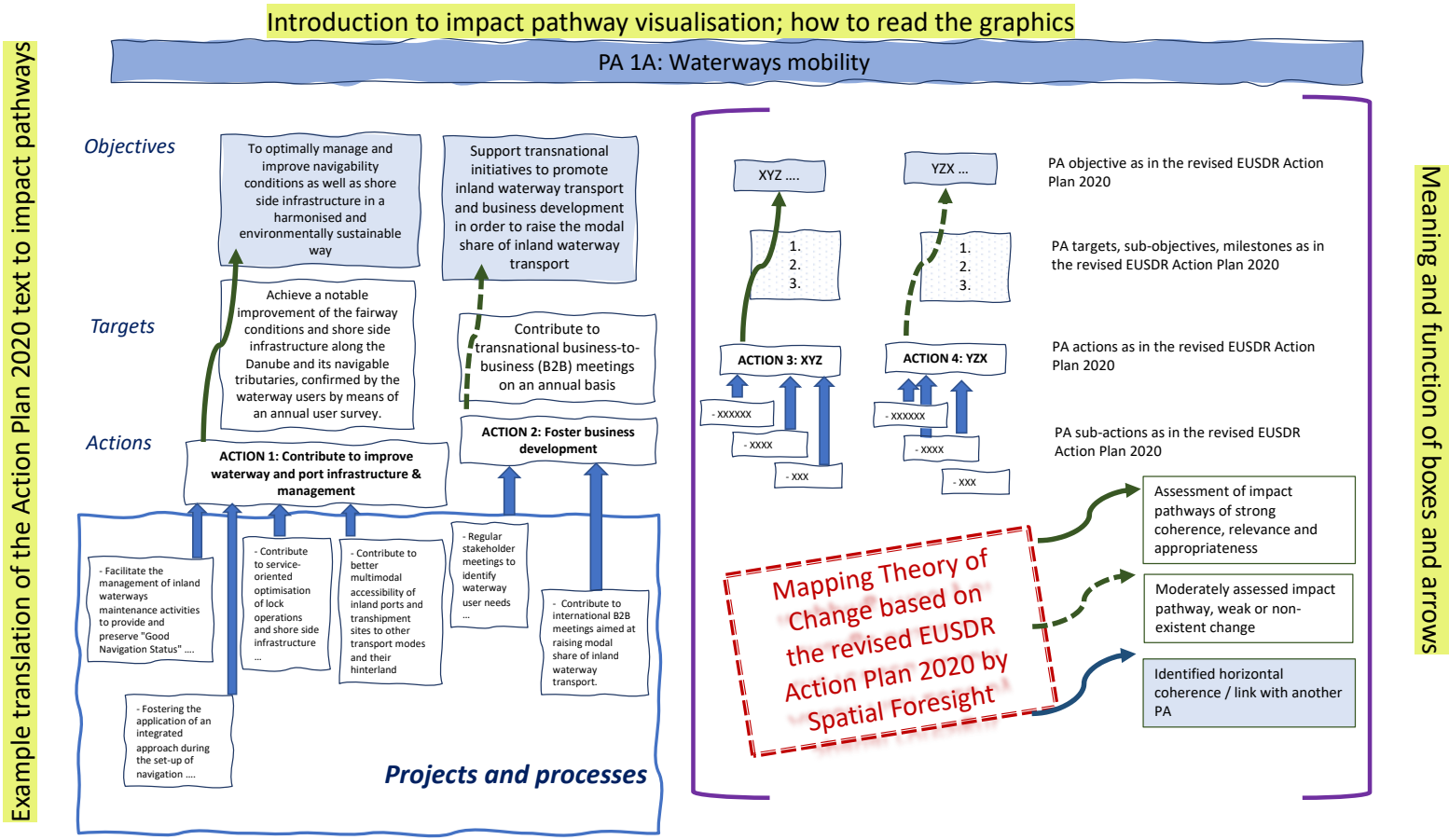
fields, which may impact the analysis that may be possible. One other option to explore is whether the information on the diversity of funding resources can be linked to the reporting on actions.

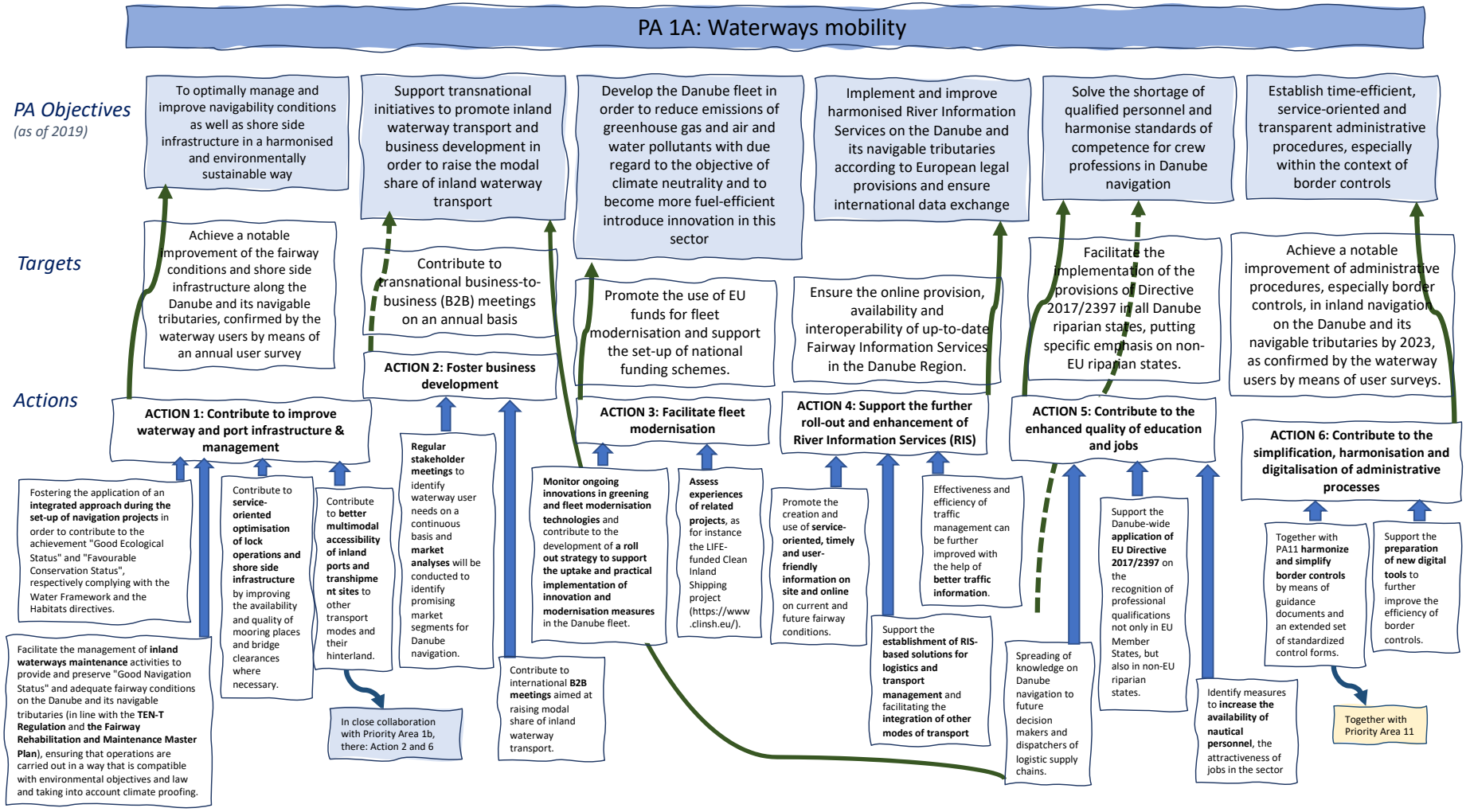
- In view of analysing the achievements of the EUSDR, however, the questionnaire aims to receive the information needed. Yet, as described above, it could be presented in a more facilitated way to the PACs also allowing an easier analysis. Whether this is technically possible, needs to be seen.

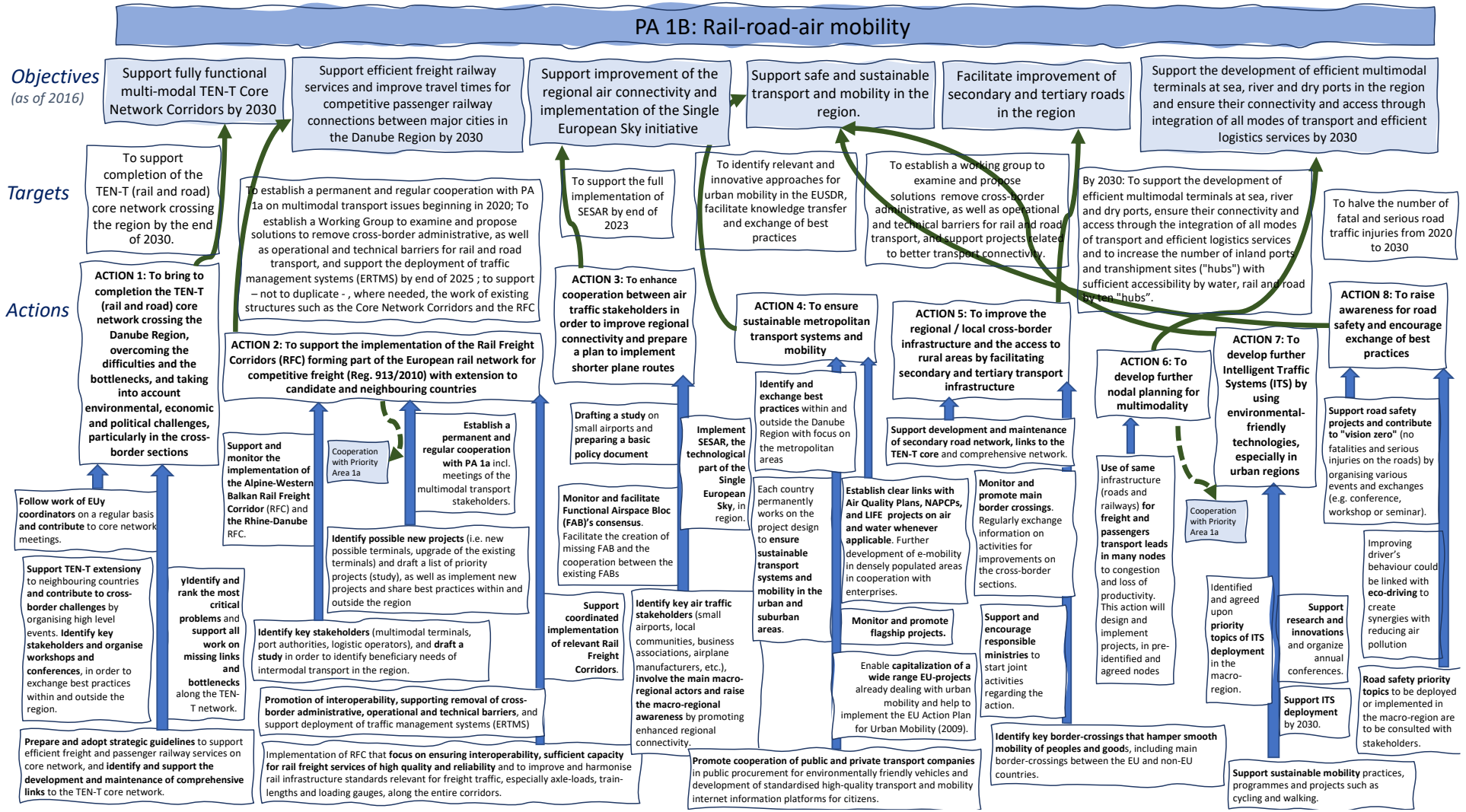
Response by the evaluation team

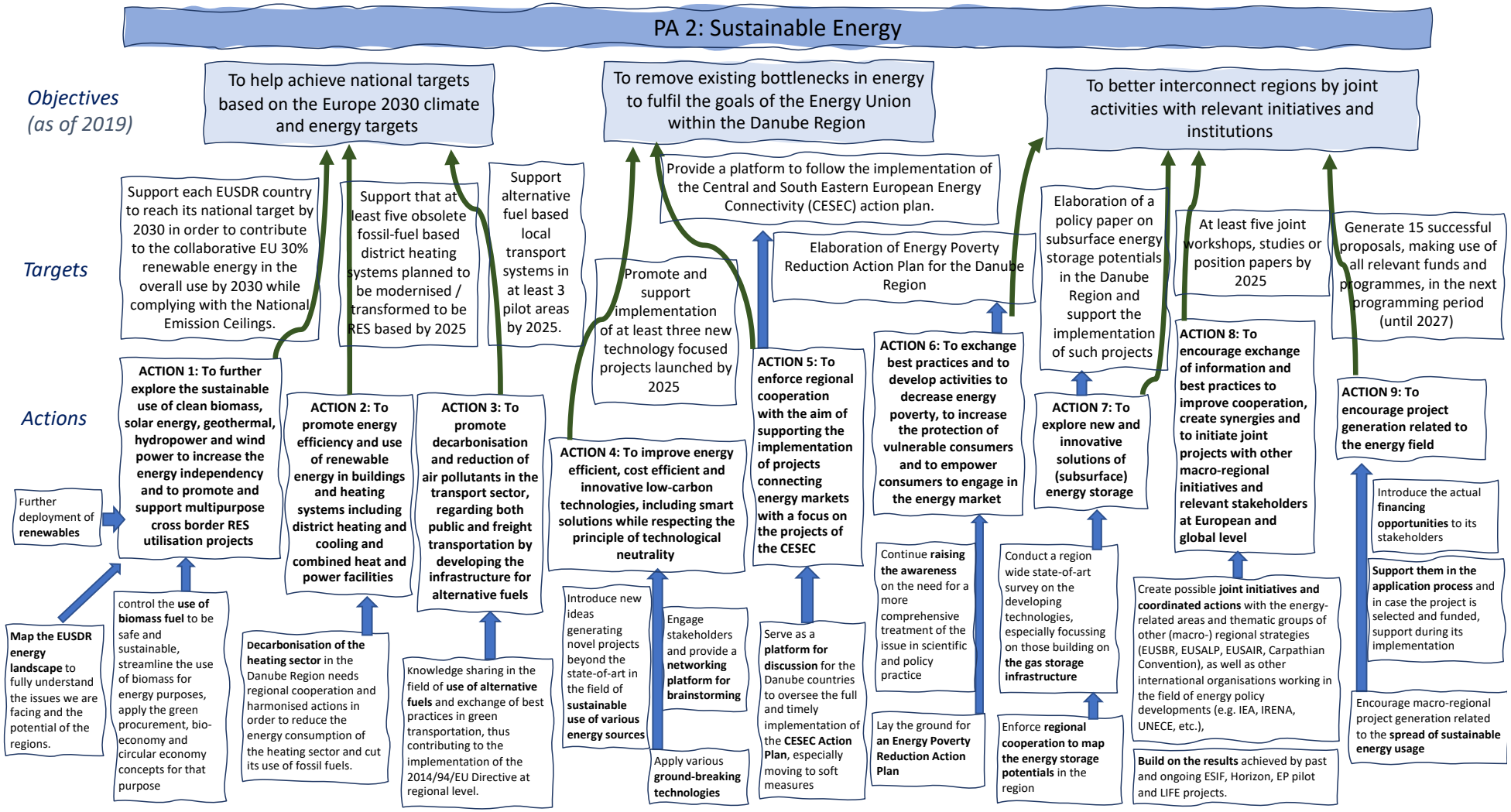
The evaluation team was glad to see that even in the timeframe of the evaluation the regular contact and discussion between the DSP and the evaluation team has led to a good exchange and some of the comments were useful for the revision of the monitoring system. The new monitoring system is substantially shortened, while still building and contributing to the two existing monitoring systems – the MRS implementation report and the DTP reports. The tool also allows PACs to easier build on the structure of their actions and alleviates the PACs from copying information from different reports as this is being taken over by the DSP. The key comments provided above thus have been addressed by the DSP in an efficient manner.

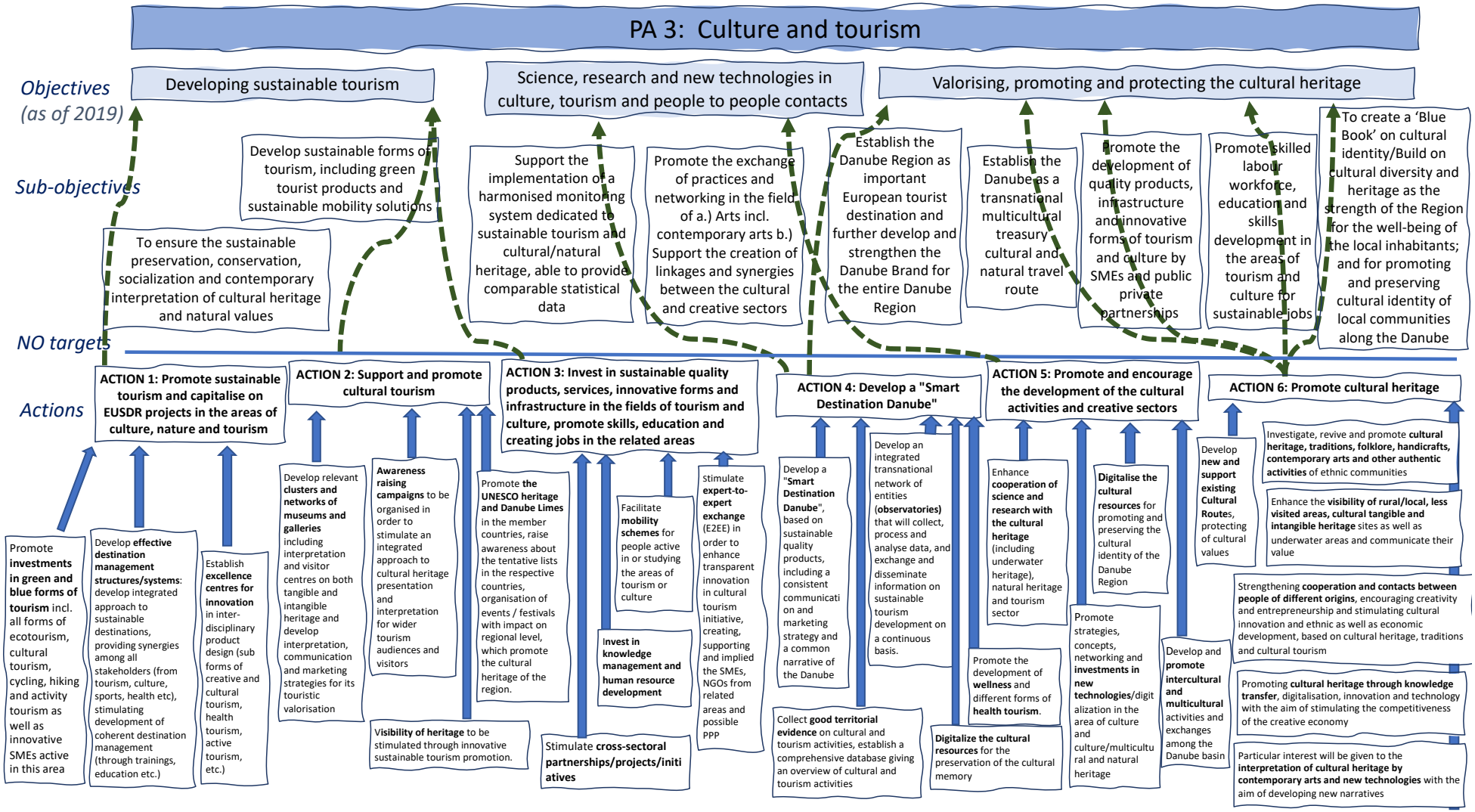
Annex VIII EUSDR Impact pathways by PAs

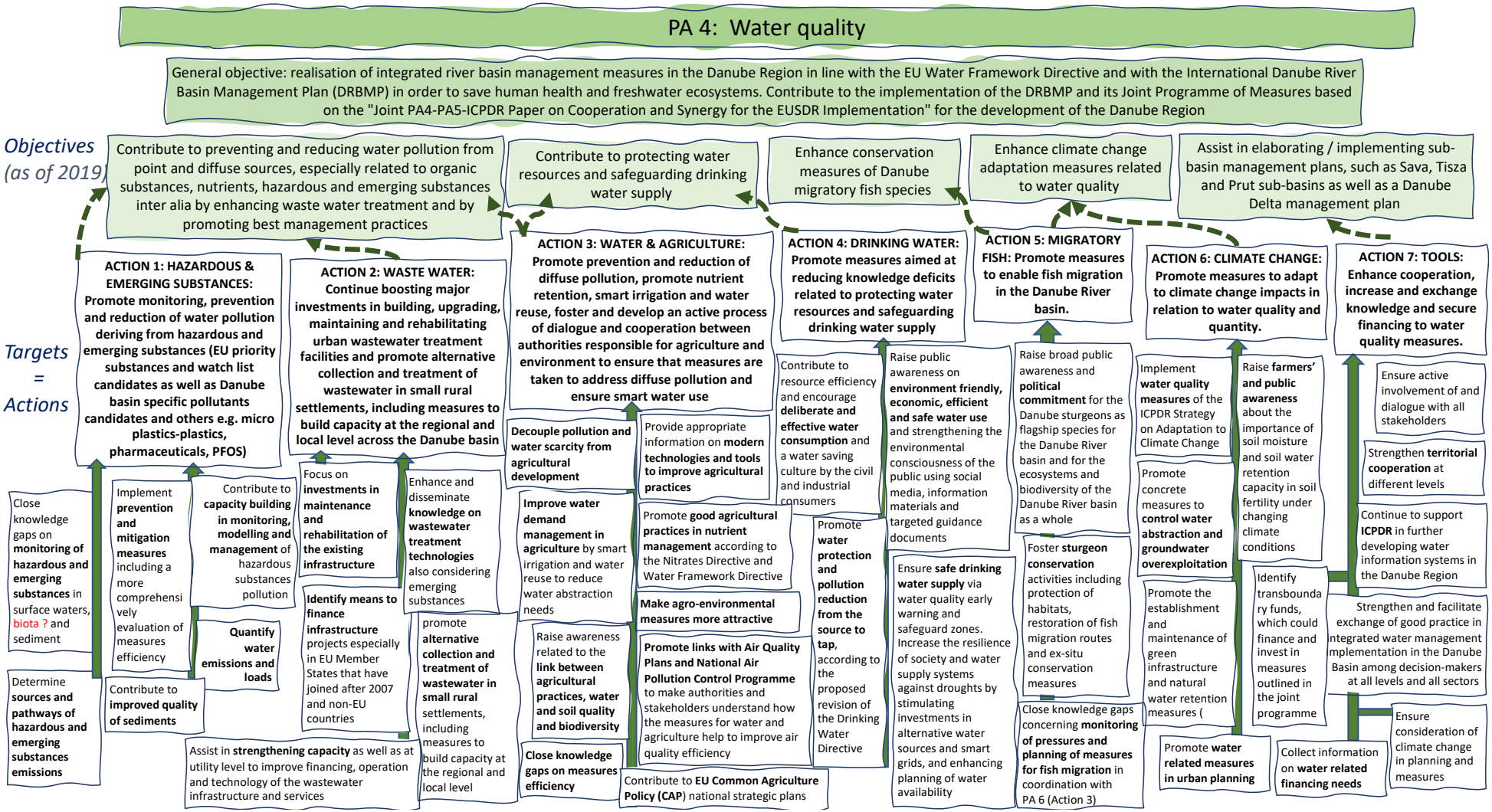


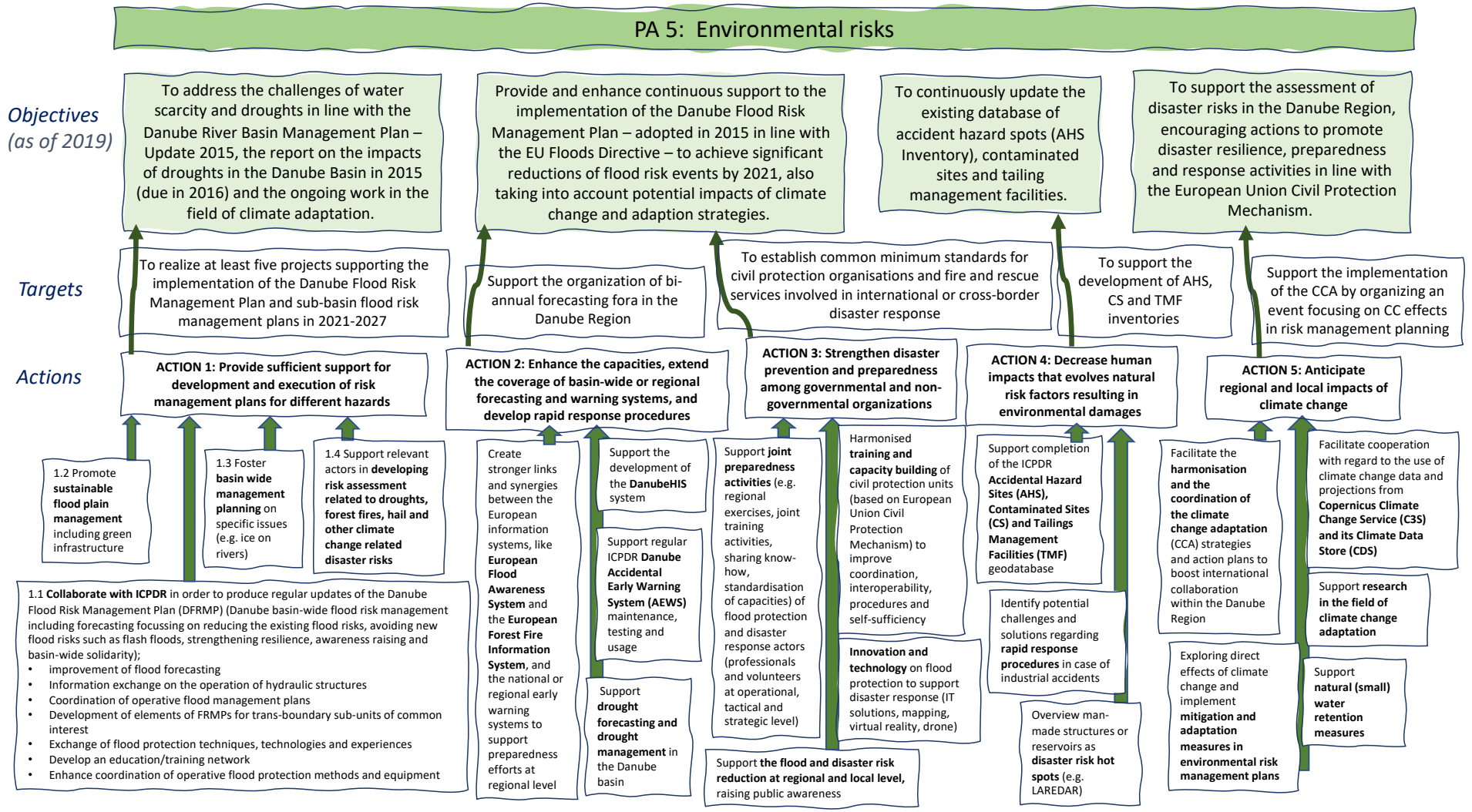

PA 1A: Waterways mobility
PA Objectives
(as of 2019)
Targets
Actions
To optimally manage and improve navigability conditions as well as shore side infrastructure in a harmonised and environmentally sustainable way
Support transnational initiatives to promote inland waterway transport and business development in order to raise the modal share of inland waterway transport
Develop the Danube fleet in order to reduce emissions of greenhouse gas and air and water pollutants with due regard to the objective of climate neutrality and to become more fuel-efficient introduce innovation in this sector
Implement and improve harmonised River Information Services on the Danube and its navigable tributaries according to European legal provisions and ensure international data exchange
Solve the shortage of qualified personnel and harmonise standards of competence for crew professions in Danube navigation
Establish time-efficient, service-oriented and transparent administrative procedures, especially within the context of border controls
Achieve a notable improvement of the fairway conditions and shore side infrastructure along the Danube and its navigable tributaries, confirmed by the waterway users by means of an annual user survey
Contribute to transnational business-to-business (B2B) meetings on an annual basis
Promote the use of EU funds for fleet modernisation and support the set-up of national funding schemes.
Ensure the online provision, availability and interoperability of up-to-date Fairway Information Services in the Danube Region.
Facilitate the implementation of the provisions of Directive 2017/2397 in all Danube riparian states, putting specific emphasis on non-EU riparian states.
Achieve a notable improvement of administrative procedures, especially border controls, in inland navigation on the Danube and its navigable tributaries by 2023, as confirmed by the waterway users by means of user surveys.
ACTION 1: Contribute to improve waterway and port infrastructure & management
ACTION 2: Foster business development
ACTION 3: Facilitate fleet modernisation
ACTION 4: Support the further roll-out and enhancement of River Information Services (RIS)
ACTION 5: Contribute to the enhanced quality of education and jobs
ACTION 6: Contribute to the simplification, harmonisation and digitalisation of administrative processes
Fostering the application of an integrated approach during the set-up of navigation projects in order to contribute to the achievement "Good Ecological Status" and "Favourable Conservation Status", respectively complying with the Water Framework and the Habitats directives.
Facilitate the management of inland waterways maintenance activities to provide and preserve "Good Navigation Status" and adequate fairway conditions on the Danube and its navigable tributaries (in line with the TEN-T Regulation and the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan), ensuring that operations are carried out in a way that is compatible with environmental objectives and law and taking into account climate proofing.
Contribute to service-oriented optimisation of lock operations and shore side infrastructure by improving the availability and quality of mooring places and bridge clearances where necessary.
Contribute to better multimodal accessibility of inland ports and transhipment sites to other transport modes and their hinterland.
In close collaboration with Priority Area 1b, there: Action 2 and 6
Regular stakeholder meetings to identify waterway user needs on a continuous basis and market analyses will be conducted to identify promising market segments for Danube navigation.
Contribute to international B2B meetings aimed at raising modal share of inland waterway transport.
Monitor ongoing innovations in greening and fleet modernisation technologies and contribute to the development of a roll out strategy to support the uptake and practical implementation of innovation and modernisation measures in the Danube fleet.
Assess experiences of related projects, as for instance the LIFE-funded Clean Inland Shipping project (https://www.clinsh.eu/).
Promote the creation and use of service-oriented, timely and user-friendly information on site and online on current and future fairway conditions.
Effectiveness and efficiency of traffic management can be further improved with the help of better traffic information.
Support the establishment of RIS-based solutions for logistics and transport management and facilitating the integration of other modes of transport
Spreading of knowledge on Danube navigation to future decision makers and dispatchers of logistic supply chains.
Support the Danube-wide application of EU Directive 2017/2397 on the recognition of professional qualifications not only in EU Member States, but also in non-EU riparian states.
Identify measures to increase the availability of nautical personnel, the attractiveness of jobs in the sector
Together with PA11 harmonize and simplify border controls by means of guidance documents and an extended set of standardized control forms.
Support the preparation of new digital tools to further improve the efficiency of border controls.
Together with Priority Area 11

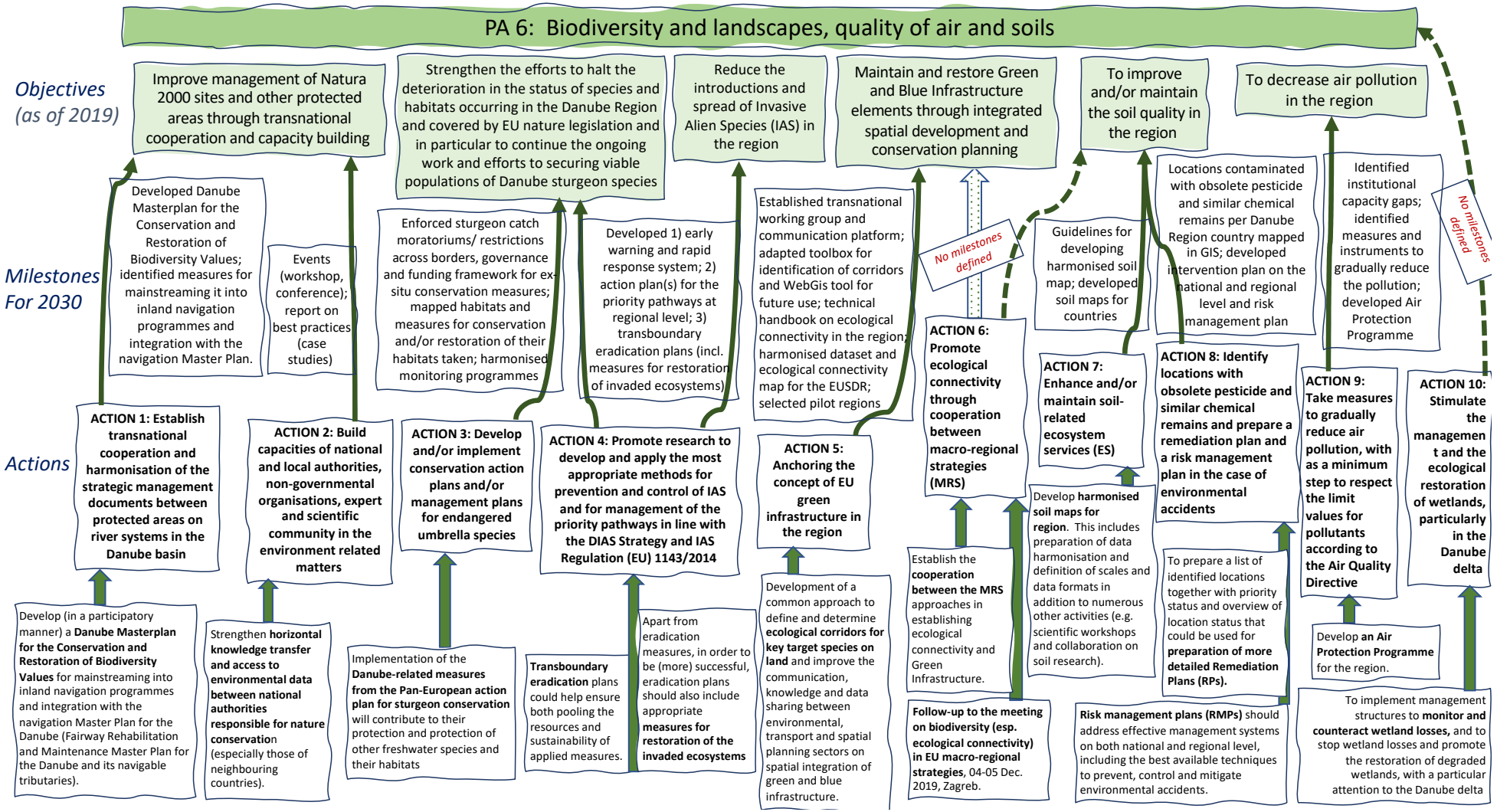

PA 1B: Rail-road-air mobility
Objectives
(as of 2016)
Targets
Actions
Support fully functional multi-modal TEN-T Core Network Corridors by 2030
Support efficient freight railway services and improve travel times for competitive passenger railway connections between major cities in the Danube Region by 2030
Support improvement of the regional air connectivity and implementation of the Single European Sky initiative
Support safe and sustainable transport and mobility in the region.
Facilitate improvement of secondary and tertiary roads in the region
Support the development of efficient multimodal terminals at sea, river and dry ports in the region and ensure their connectivity and access through integration of all modes of transport and efficient logistics services by 2030
To support completion of the TEN-T (rail and road) core network crossing the region by the end of 2030.
To establish a permanent and regular cooperation with PA 1a on multimodal transport issues beginning in 2020; To establish a Working Group to examine and propose solutions to remove cross-border administrative, as well as operational and technical barriers for rail and road transport, and support the deployment of traffic management systems (ERTMS) by end of 2025 ; to support – not to duplicate - , where needed, the work of existing structures such as the Core Network Corridors and the RFC
To support the full implementation of SESAR by end of 2023
To identify relevant and innovative approaches for urban mobility in the EUSDR, facilitate knowledge transfer and exchange of best practices
To establish a working group to examine and propose solutions remove cross-border administrative, as well as operational and technical barriers for rail and road transport, and support projects related to better transport connectivity.
By 2030: To support the development of efficient multimodal terminals at sea, river and dry ports, ensure their connectivity and access through the integration of all modes of transport and efficient logistics services and to increase the number of inland ports and transhipment sites ("hubs") with sufficient accessibility by water, rail and road by ten "hubs".
To halve the number of fatal and serious road traffic injuries from 2020 to 2030
ACTION 1: To bring to completion the TEN-T (rail and road) core network crossing the Danube Region, overcoming the difficulties and the bottlenecks, and taking into account environmental, economic and political challenges, particularly in the cross-border sections
ACTION 2: To support the implementation of the Rail Freight Corridors (RFC) forming part of the European rail network for competitive freight (Reg. 913/2010) with extension to candidate and neighbouring countries
ACTION 3: To enhance cooperation between air traffic stakeholders in order to improve regional connectivity and prepare a plan to implement shorter plane routes
ACTION 4: To ensure sustainable metropolitan transport systems and mobility
ACTION 5: To improve the regional / local cross-border infrastructure and the access to rural areas by facilitating secondary and tertiary transport infrastructure
ACTION 6: To develop further nodal planning for multimodality
ACTION 7: To develop further Intelligent Traffic Systems (ITS) by using environmental-friendly technologies, especially in urban regions
ACTION 8: To raise awareness for road safety and encourage exchange of best practices
Follow work of EUy coordinators on a regular basis and contribute to core network meetings.
Support TEN-T extensiony to neighbouring countries and contribute to cross-border challenges by organising high level events. Identify key stakeholders and organise workshops and conferences, in order to exchange best practices within and outside the region.
yIdentify and rank the most critical problems and support all work on missing links and bottlenecks along the TEN-T network.
Prepare and adopt strategic guidelines to support efficient freight and passenger railway services on core network, and identify and support the development and maintenance of comprehensive links to the TEN-T core network.
Support and monitor the implementation of the Alpine-Western Balkan Rail Freight Corridor (RFC) and the Rhine-Danube RFC.
Cooperation with Priority Area 1a
Establish a permanent and regular cooperation with PA 1a incl. meetings of the multimodal transport stakeholders.
Identify possible new projects (i.e. new possible terminals, upgrade of the existing terminals) and draft a list of priority projects (study), as well as implement new projects and share best practices within and outside the region
Identify key stakeholders (multimodal terminals, port authorities, logistic operators), and draft a study in order to identify beneficiary needs of intermodal transport in the region.
Promotion of interoperability, supporting removal of cross-border administrative, operational and technical barriers, and support deployment of traffic management systems (ERTMS)
Implementation of RFC that focus on ensuring interoperability, sufficient capacity for rail freight services of high quality and reliability and to improve and harmonise rail infrastructure standards relevant for freight traffic, especially axle-loads, train-lengths and loading gauges, along the entire corridors.
Drafting a study on small airports and preparing a basic policy document
Monitor and facilitate Functional Airspace Bloc (FAB)'s consensus. Facilitate the creation of missing FAB and the cooperation between the existing FABs
Support coordinated implementation of relevant Rail Freight Corridors.
Implement SESAR, the technological part of the Single European Sky, in region.
Identify key air traffic stakeholders (small airports, local communities, business associations, airplane manufacturers, etc.), involve the main macro-regional actors and raise the macro-regional awareness by promoting enhanced regional connectivity.
Identify and exchange best practices within and outside the Danube Region with focus on the metropolitan areas
Each country permanently works on the project design to ensure sustainable transport systems and mobility in the urban and suburban areas.
Promote cooperation of public and private transport companies in public procurement for environmentally friendly vehicles and development of standardised high-quality transport and mobility internet information platforms for citizens.
Support development and maintenance of secondary road network, links to the TEN-T core and comprehensive network.
Establish clear links with Air Quality Plans, NAPCPs, and LIFE projects on air and water whenever applicable. Further development of e-mobility in densely populated areas in cooperation with enterprises.
Monitor and promote flagship projects.
Enable capitalization of a wide range EU-projects already dealing with urban mobility and help to implement the EU Action Plan for Urban Mobility (2009).
Monitor and promote main border crossings. Regularly exchange information on activities for improvements on the cross-border sections.
Support and encourage responsible ministries to start joint activities regarding the action.
Identify key border-crossings that hamper smooth mobility of peoples and goods, including main border-crossings between the EU and non-EU countries.
Use of same infrastructure (roads and railways) for freight and passengers transport leads in many nodes to congestion and loss of productivity. This action will design and implement projects, in pre-identified and agreed nodes
Cooperation with Priority Area 1a
Identified and agreed upon priority topics of ITS deployment in the macro-region.
Support research and innovations and organize annual conferences.
Support ITS deployment by 2030.
Support sustainable mobility practices, programmes and projects such as cycling and walking.
Support road safety projects and contribute to "vision zero" (no fatalities and serious injuries on the roads) by organising various events and exchanges (e.g. conference, workshop or seminar).
Improving driver's behaviour could be linked with eco-driving to create synergies with reducing air pollution
Road safety priority topics to be deployed or implemented in the macro-region are to be consulted with stakeholders.

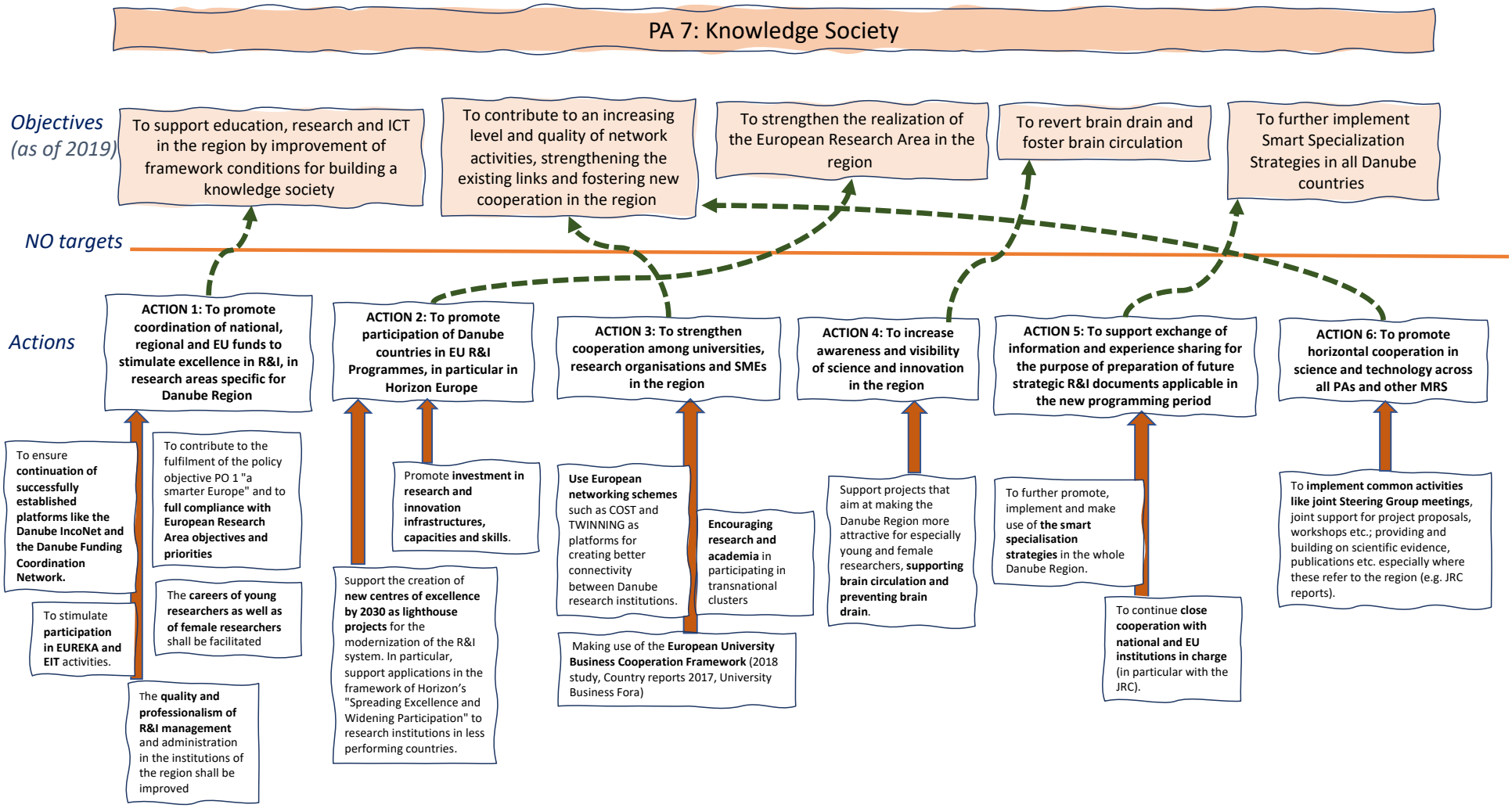

PA 2: Sustainable Energy
Objectives (as of 2019)
Targets
Actions
To help achieve national targets based on the Europe 2030 climate and energy targets
To remove existing bottlenecks in energy to fulfil the goals of the Energy Union within the Danube Region
To better interconnect regions by joint activities with relevant initiatives and institutions
Support each EUSDR country to reach its national target by 2030 in order to contribute to the collaborative EU 30% renewable energy in the overall use by 2030 while complying with the National Emission Ceilings.
Support that at least five obsolete fossil-fuel based district heating systems planned to be modernised / transformed to be RES based by 2025
Support alternative fuel based local transport systems in at least 3 pilot areas by 2025.
Promote and support implementation of at least three new technology focused projects launched by 2025
Provide a platform to follow the implementation of the Central and South Eastern European Energy Connectivity (CESEC) action plan.
Elaboration of Energy Poverty Reduction Action Plan for the Danube Region
Elaboration of a policy paper on subsurface energy storage potentials in the Danube Region and support the implementation of such projects
At least five joint workshops, studies or position papers by 2025
Generate 15 successful proposals, making use of all relevant funds and programmes, in the next programming period (until 2027)
ACTION 1: To further explore the sustainable use of clean biomass, solar energy, geothermal, hydropower and wind power to increase the energy independency and to promote and support multipurpose cross border RES utilisation projects
ACTION 2: To promote energy efficiency and use of renewable energy in buildings and heating systems including district heating and cooling and combined heat and power facilities
ACTION 3: To promote decarbonisation and reduction of air pollutants in the transport sector, regarding both public and freight transportation by developing the infrastructure for alternative fuels
ACTION 4: To improve energy efficient, cost efficient and innovative low-carbon technologies, including smart solutions while respecting the principle of technological neutrality
ACTION 5: To enforce regional cooperation with the aim of supporting the implementation of projects connecting energy markets with a focus on the projects of the CESEC
ACTION 6: To exchange best practices and to develop activities to decrease energy poverty, to increase the protection of vulnerable consumers and to empower consumers to engage in the energy market
ACTION 7: To explore new and innovative solutions of (subsurface) energy storage
ACTION 8: To encourage exchange of information and best practices to improve cooperation, create synergies and to initiate joint projects with other macro-regional initiatives and relevant stakeholders at European and global level
ACTION 9: To encourage project generation related to the energy field
Further deployment of renewables
Map the EUSDR energy landscape to fully understand the issues we are facing and the potential of the regions.
control the use of biomass fuel to be safe and sustainable, streamline the use of biomass for energy purposes, apply the green procurement, bio-economy and circular economy concepts for that purpose
Decarbonisation of the heating sector in the Danube Region needs regional cooperation and harmonised actions in order to reduce the energy consumption of the heating sector and cut its use of fossil fuels.
Knowledge sharing in the field of use of alternative fuels and exchange of best practices in green transportation, thus contributing to the implementation of the 2014/94/EU Directive at regional level.
Introduce new ideas generating novel projects beyond the state-of-art in the field of sustainable use of various energy sources
Engage stakeholders and provide a networking platform for brainstorming
Apply various ground-breaking technologies
Serve as a platform for discussion for the Danube countries to oversee the full and timely implementation of the CESEC Action Plan, especially moving to soft measures
Continue raising the awareness on the need for a more comprehensive treatment of the issue in scientific and policy practice
Lay the ground for an Energy Poverty Reduction Action Plan
Conduct a region wide state-of-art survey on the developing technologies, especially focussing on those building on the gas storage infrastructure
Enforce regional cooperation to map the energy storage potentials in the region
Create possible joint initiatives and coordinated actions with the energy-related areas and thematic groups of other (macro-) regional strategies (EUSBR, EUSALP, EUSAIR, Carpathian Convention), as well as other international organisations working in the field of energy policy developments (e.g. IEA, IRENA, UNECE, etc.),
Build on the results achieved by past and ongoing ESIF, Horizon, EP pilot and LIFE projects.
Introduce the actual financing opportunities to its stakeholders
Support them in the application process and in case the project is selected and funded, support during its implementation
Encourage macro-regional project generation related to the spread of sustainable energy usage

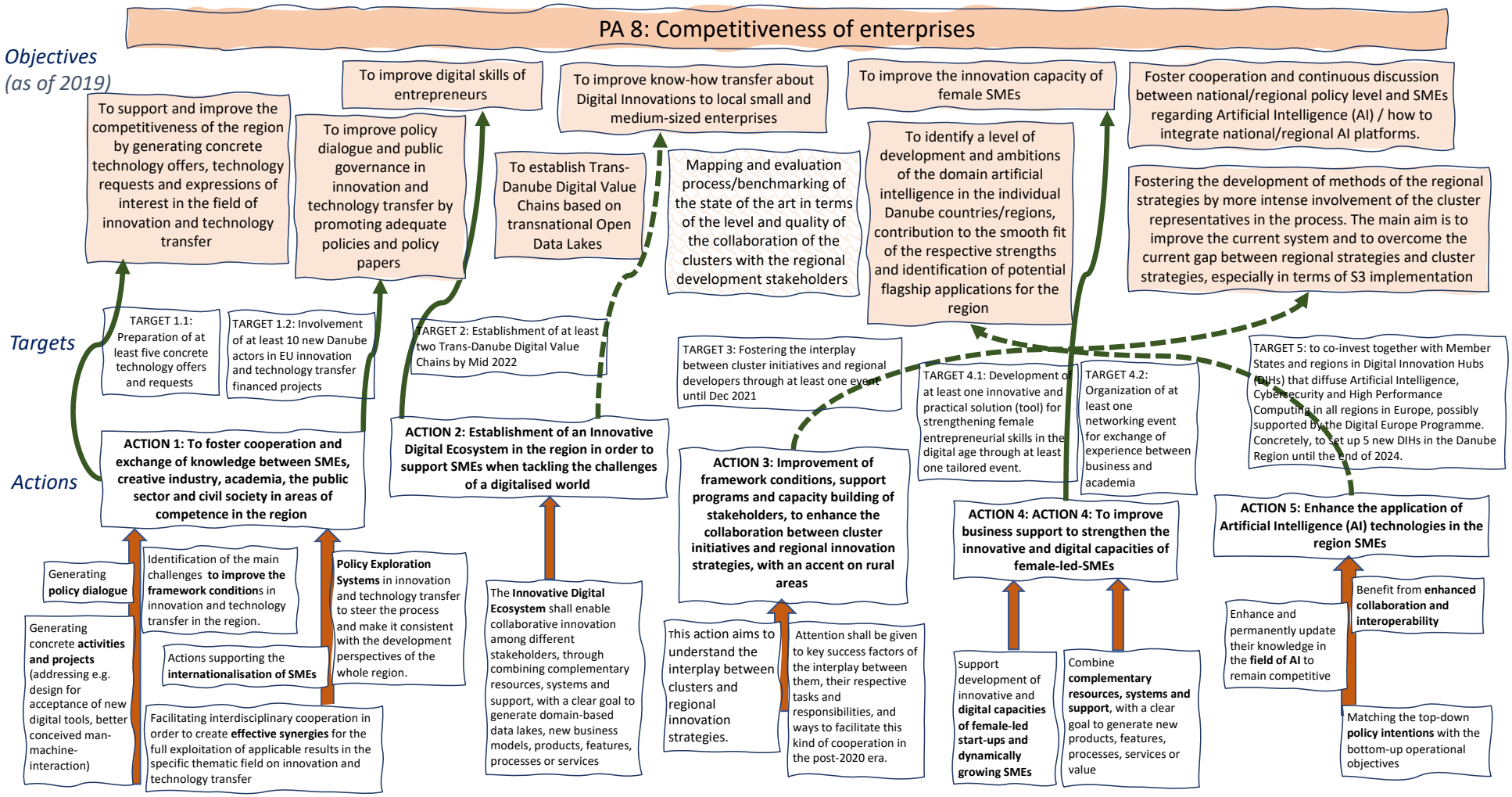

PA 3: Culture and tourism
Objectives (as of 2019)
Sub-objectives
NO targets
Actions
Developing sustainable tourism
Science, research and new technologies in culture, tourism and people to people contacts
Valorising, promoting and protecting the cultural heritage
To ensure the sustainable preservation, conservation, socialization and contemporary interpretation of cultural heritage and natural values
Develop sustainable forms of tourism, including green tourist products and sustainable mobility solutions
Support the implementation of a harmonised monitoring system dedicated to sustainable tourism and cultural/natural heritage, able to provide comparable statistical data
Promote the exchange of practices and networking in the field of a.) Arts incl. contemporary arts b.) Support the creation of linkages and synergies between the cultural and creative sectors
Establish the Danube Region as important European tourist destination and further develop and strengthen the Danube Brand for the entire Danube Region
Establish the Danube as a transnational multicultural treasury - cultural and natural travel route
Promote the development of quality products, infrastructure and innovative forms of tourism and culture by SMEs and public private partnerships
Promote skilled labour workforce, education and skills development in the areas of tourism and culture for sustainable jobs
To create a 'Blue Book' on cultural identity/Build on cultural diversity and heritage as the strength of the Region for the well-being of the local inhabitants; and for promoting and preserving cultural identity of local communities along the Danube
ACTION 1: Promote sustainable tourism and capitalise on EUSDR projects in the areas of culture, nature and tourism
ACTION 2: Support and promote cultural tourism
ACTION 3: Invest in sustainable quality products, services, innovative forms and infrastructure in the fields of tourism and culture, promote skills, education and creating jobs in the related areas
ACTION 4: Develop a "Smart Destination Danube"
ACTION 5: Promote and encourage the development of the cultural activities and creative sectors
ACTION 6: Promote cultural heritage
Promote investments in green and blue forms of tourism incl. all forms of ecotourism, cultural tourism, cycling, hiking and activity tourism as well as innovative SMEs active in this area
Develop effective destination management structures/systems: develop integrated approach to sustainable destinations, providing synergies among all stakeholders (from tourism, culture, sports, health etc), stimulating development of coherent destination management (through trainings, education etc.)
Establish excellence centres for innovation in inter-disciplinary product design (sub forms of creative and cultural tourism, health tourism, active tourism, etc.)
Develop relevant clusters and networks of museums and galleries including interpretation and visitor centres on both tangible and intangible heritage and develop interpretation, communication and marketing strategies for its touristic valorisation
Awareness raising campaigns to be organised in order to stimulate an integrated approach to cultural heritage presentation and interpretation for wider tourism audiences and visitors
Visibility of heritage to be stimulated through innovative sustainable tourism promotion.
Promote the UNESCO heritage and Danube Limes in the member countries, raise awareness about the tentative lists in the respective countries, organisation of events / festivals with impact on regional level, which promote the cultural heritage of the region.
Facilitate mobility schemes for people active in or studying the areas of tourism or culture
Invest in knowledge management and human resource development
Stimulate cross-sectoral partnerships/projects/initiatives
stimulate expert-to-expert exchange (E2EE) in order to enhance transparent innovation in cultural tourism initiative, creating, supporting and implied the SMEs, NGOs from related areas and possible PPP
Develop a "Smart Destination Danube", based on sustainable quality products, including a consistent communication and marketing strategy and a common narrative of the Danube
Develop an integrated transnational network of entities (observatories) that will collect, process and analyse data, and exchange and disseminate information on sustainable tourism development on a continuous basis.
Collect good territorial evidence on cultural and tourism activities, establish a comprehensive database giving an overview of cultural and tourism activities
Digitalize the cultural resources for the preservation of the cultural memory
Promote the development of wellness and different forms of health tourism.
Enhance cooperation of science and research with the cultural heritage (including underwater heritage), natural heritage and tourism sector
Digitalise the cultural resources for promoting and preserving the cultural identity of the Danube Region
Promote strategies, concepts, networking and investments in new technologies/digitalization in the area of culture and culture/multicultural and natural heritage
Develop and promote intercultural and multicultural activities and exchanges among the Danube basin
Develop new and support existing Cultural Routes, protecting of cultural values
Investigate, revive and promote cultural heritage, traditions, folklore, handicrafts, contemporary arts and other authentic activities of ethnic communities
Enhance the visibility of rural/local, less visited areas, cultural tangible and intangible heritage sites as well as underwater areas and communicate their value
Strengthening cooperation and contacts between people of different origins, encouraging creativity and entrepreneurship and stimulating cultural innovation and ethnic as well as economic development, based on cultural heritage, traditions and cultural tourism
Promoting cultural heritage through knowledge transfer, digitalisation, innovation and technology with the aim of stimulating the competitiveness of the creative economy
Particular interest will be given to the interpretation of cultural heritage by contemporary arts and new technologies with the aim of developing new narratives

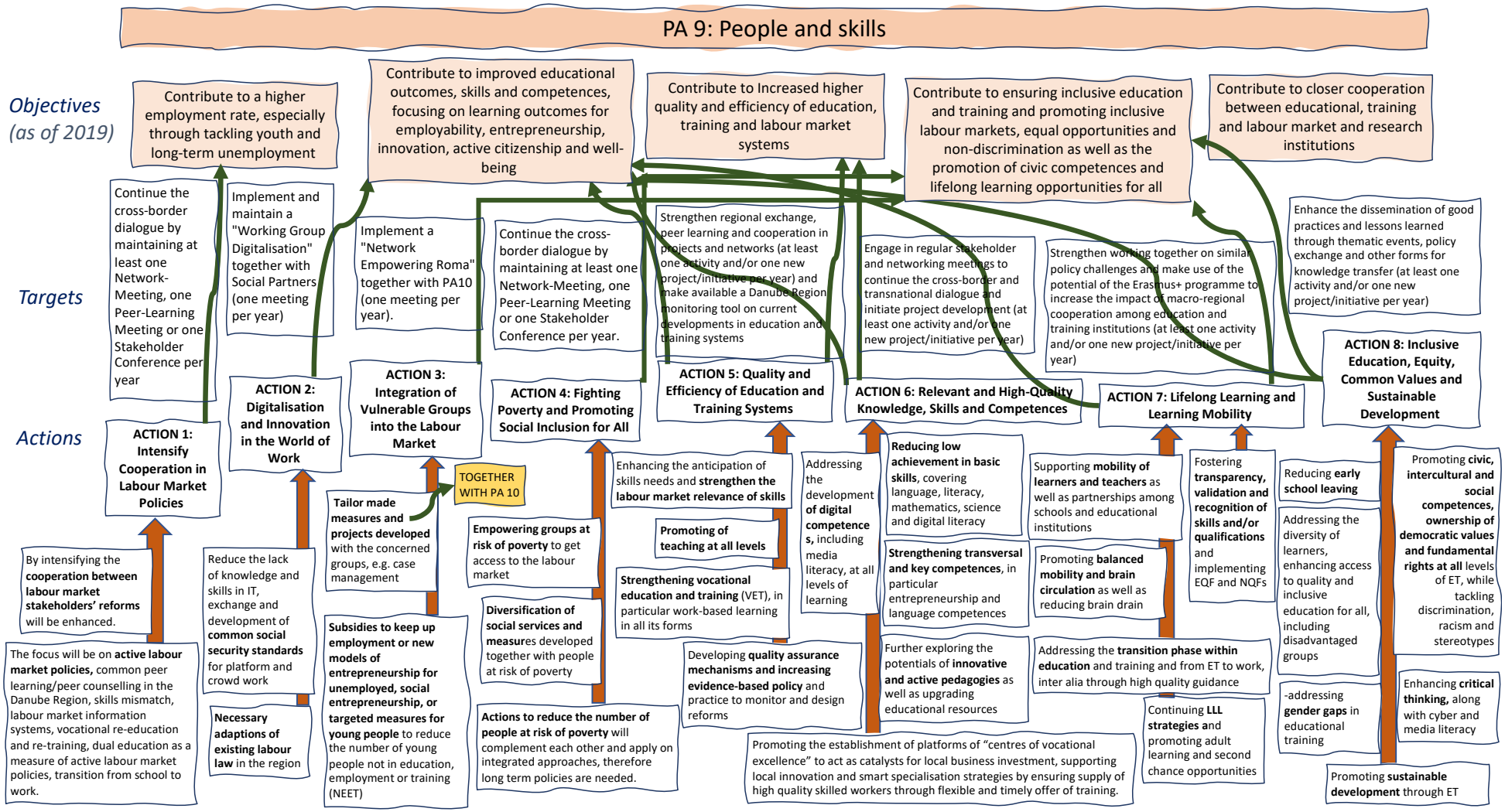

PA 4: Water quality
General objective: realisation of integrated river basin management measures in the Danube Region in line with the EU Water Framework Directive and with the International Danube River Basin Management Plan (DRBMP) in order to save human health and freshwater ecosystems. Contribute to the implementation of the DRBMP and its Joint Programme of Measures based on the "Joint PA4-PA5-ICPDR Paper on Cooperation and Synergy for the EUSDR Implementation" for the development of the Danube Region
Objectives (as of 2019)
Targets = Actions
Contribute to preventing and reducing water pollution from point and diffuse sources, especially related to organic substances, nutrients, hazardous and emerging substances inter alia by enhancing waste water treatment and by promoting best management practices
Contribute to protecting water resources and safeguarding drinking water supply
Enhance conservation measures of Danube migratory fish species
Enhance climate change adaptation measures related to water quality
Assist in elaborating / implementing sub-basin management plans, such as Sava, Tisza and Prut sub-basins as well as a Danube Delta management plan
ACTION 1: HAZARDOUS & EMERGING SUBSTANCES: Promote monitoring, prevention and reduction of water pollution deriving from hazardous and emerging substances (EU priority substances and watch list candidates as well as Danube basin specific pollutants candidates and others e.g. micro plastics-plastics, pharmaceuticals, PFOS)
Close knowledge gaps on monitoring of hazardous and emerging substances in surface waters, biota ? and sediment
Implement prevention and mitigation measures including a more comprehensively evaluation of measures efficiency
Contribute to capacity building in monitoring, modelling and management of hazardous substances pollution
Quantify water emissions and loads
Determine sources and pathways of hazardous and emerging substances emissions
Contribute to improved quality of sediments
ACTION 2: WASTE WATER: Continue boosting major investments in building, upgrading, maintaining and rehabilitating urban wastewater treatment facilities and promote alternative collection and treatment of wastewater in small rural settlements, including measures to build capacity at the regional and local level across the Danube basin
Focus on investments in maintenance and rehabilitation of the existing infrastructure
Enhance and disseminate knowledge on wastewater treatment technologies also considering emerging substances
Identify means to finance infrastructure projects especially in EU Member States that have joined after 2007 and non-EU countries
promote alternative collection and treatment of wastewater in small rural settlements, including measures to build capacity at the regional and local level
Assist in strengthening capacity as well as at utility level to improve financing, operation and technology of the wastewater infrastructure and services
ACTION 3: WATER & AGRICULTURE: Promote prevention and reduction of diffuse pollution, promote nutrient retention, smart irrigation and water reuse, foster and develop an active process of dialogue and cooperation between authorities responsible for agriculture and environment to ensure that measures are taken to address diffuse pollution and ensure smart water use
Decouple pollution and water scarcity from agricultural development
Provide appropriate information on modern technologies and tools to improve agricultural practices
Improve water demand management in agriculture by smart irrigation and water reuse to reduce water abstraction needs
Promote good agricultural practices in nutrient management according to the Nitrates Directive and Water Framework Directive
Make agro-environmental measures more attractive
Raise awareness related to the link between agricultural practices, water and soil quality and biodiversity
Promote links with Air Quality Plans and National Air Pollution Control Programme to make authorities and stakeholders understand how the measures for water and agriculture help to improve air quality efficiency
Close knowledge gaps on measures efficiency
Contribute to EU Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) national strategic plans
ACTION 4: DRINKING WATER: Promote measures aimed at reducing knowledge deficits related to protecting water resources and safeguarding drinking water supply
Contribute to resource efficiency and encourage deliberate and effective water consumption and a water saving culture by the civil and industrial consumers
Promote water protection and pollution reduction from the source to tap, according to the proposed revision of the Drinking Water Directive
ACTION 5: MIGRATORY FISH: Promote measures to enable fish migration in the Danube River basin.
Raise public awareness on environment friendly, economic, efficient and safe water use and strengthening the environmental consciousness of the public using social media, information materials and targeted guidance documents
Raise broad public awareness and political commitment for the Danube sturgeons as flagship species for the Danube River basin and for the ecosystems and biodiversity of the Danube River basin as a whole
Foster sturgeon conservation activities including protection of habitats, restoration of fish migration routes and ex-situ conservation measures
Ensure safe drinking water supply via water quality early warning and safeguard zones. Increase the resilience of society and water supply systems against droughts by stimulating investments in alternative water sources and smart grids, and enhancing planning of water availability
Close knowledge gaps concerning monitoring of pressures and planning of measures for fish migration in coordination with PA 6 (Action 3)
ACTION 6: CLIMATE CHANGE: Promote measures to adapt to climate change impacts in relation to water quality and quantity.
Implement water quality measures of the ICPDR Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change
Promote concrete measures to control water abstraction and groundwater overexploitation
Promote the establishment and maintenance of green infrastructure and natural water retention measures (
Promote water related measures in urban planning
Raise farmers' and public awareness about the importance of soil moisture and soil water retention capacity in soil fertility under changing climate conditions
Identify transboundary funds, which could finance and invest in measures outlined in the joint programme
Collect information on water related financing needs
ACTION 7: TOOLS: Enhance cooperation, increase and exchange knowledge and secure financing to water quality measures.
Ensure active involvement of and dialogue with all stakeholders
Strengthen territorial cooperation at different levels
Continue to support ICPDR in further developing water information systems in the Danube Region
Strengthen and facilitate exchange of good practice in integrated water management implementation in the Danube Basin among decision-makers at all levels and all sectors
Ensure consideration of climate change in planning and measures

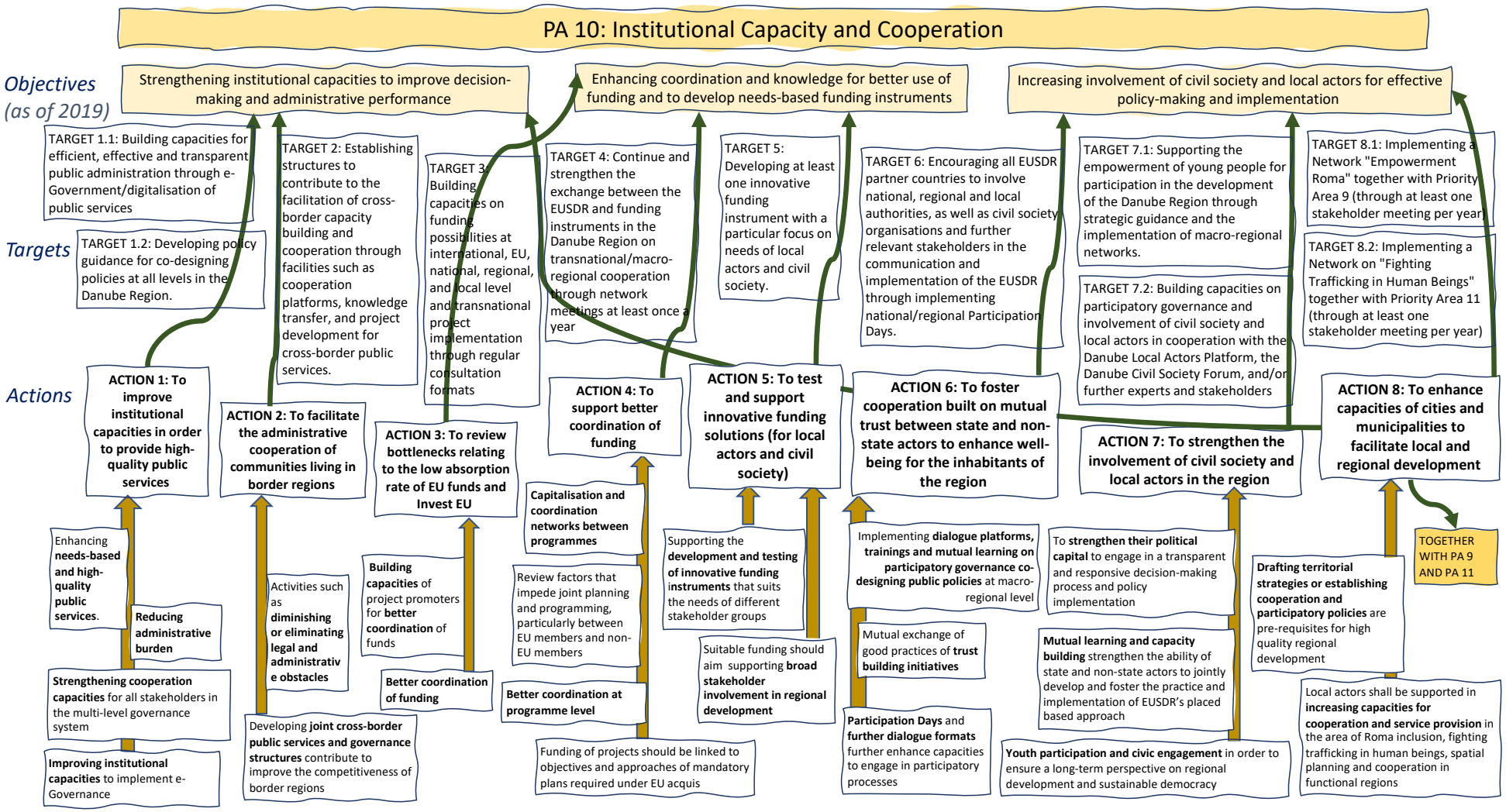

PA 5: Environmental risks
Objectives (as of 2019)
To address the challenges of water scarcity and droughts in line with the Danube River Basin Management Plan – Update 2015, the report on the impacts of droughts in the Danube Basin in 2015 (due in 2016) and the ongoing work in the field of climate adaptation.
Provide and enhance continuous support to the implementation of the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan – adopted in 2015 in line with the EU Floods Directive – to achieve significant reductions of flood risk events by 2021, also taking into account potential impacts of climate change and adaption strategies.
To continuously update the existing database of accident hazard spots (AHS Inventory), contaminated sites and tailing management facilities.
To support the assessment of disaster risks in the Danube Region, encouraging actions to promote disaster resilience, preparedness and response activities in line with the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.
Targets
To realize at least five projects supporting the implementation of the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan and sub-basin flood risk management plans in 2021-2027
Support the organization of bi-annual forecasting fora in the Danube Region
To establish common minimum standards for civil protection organisations and fire and rescue services involved in international or cross-border disaster response
To support the development of AHS, CS and TMF inventories
Support the implementation of the CCA by organizing an event focusing on CC effects in risk management planning
Actions
ACTION 1: Provide sufficient support for development and execution of risk management plans for different hazards
ACTION 2: Enhance the capacities, extend the coverage of basin-wide or regional forecasting and warning systems, and develop rapid response procedures
ACTION 3: Strengthen disaster prevention and preparedness among governmental and non-governmental organizations
ACTION 4: Decrease human impacts that evolves natural risk factors resulting in environmental damages
ACTION 5: Anticipate regional and local impacts of climate change
1.2 Promote sustainable flood plain management including green infrastructure
1.3 Foster basin wide management planning on specific issues (e.g. ice on rivers)
1.4 Support relevant actors in developing risk assessment related to droughts, forest fires, hail and other climate change related disaster risks
1.1 Collaborate with ICPDR in order to produce regular updates of the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan (DFRMP) (Danube basin-wide flood risk management including forecasting focussing on reducing the existing flood risks, avoiding new flood risks such as flash floods, strengthening resilience, awareness raising and basin-wide solidarity);
• improvement of flood forecasting
• Information exchange on the operation of hydraulic structures
• Coordination of operative flood management plans
• Development of elements of FRMPs for trans-boundary sub-units of common interest
• Exchange of flood protection techniques, technologies and experiences
• Develop an education/training network
• Enhance coordination of operative flood protection methods and equipment
Create stronger links and synergies between the European information systems, like European Flood Awareness System and the European Forest Fire Information System, and the national or regional early warning systems to support preparedness efforts at regional level
Support the development of the DanubeHIS system
Support regular ICPDR Danube Accidental Early Warning System (AEWS) maintenance, testing and usage
Support drought forecasting and drought management in the Danube basin
Support joint preparedness activities (e.g. regional exercises, joint training activities, sharing know-how, standardisation of capacities) of flood protection and disaster response actors (professionals and volunteers at operational, tactical and strategic level)
Harmonised training and capacity building of civil protection units (based on European Union Civil Protection Mechanism) to improve coordination, interoperability, procedures and self-sufficiency
Innovation and technology on flood protection to support disaster response (IT solutions, mapping, virtual reality, drone)
Support the flood and disaster risk reduction at regional and local level, raising public awareness
Support completion of the ICPDR Accidental Hazard Sites (AHS), Contaminated Sites (CS) and Tailings Management Facilities (TMF) geodatabase
Identify potential challenges and solutions regarding rapid response procedures in case of industrial accidents
Overview man-made structures or reservoirs as disaster risk hot spots (e.g. LAREDAR)
Facilitate the harmonisation and the coordination of the climate change adaptation (CCA) strategies and action plans to boost international collaboration within the Danube Region
Exploring direct effects of climate change and implement mitigation and adaptation measures in environmental risk management plans
Facilitate cooperation with regard to the use of climate change data and projections from Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) and its Climate Data Store (CDS)
Support research in the field of climate change adaptation
Support natural (small) water retention measures

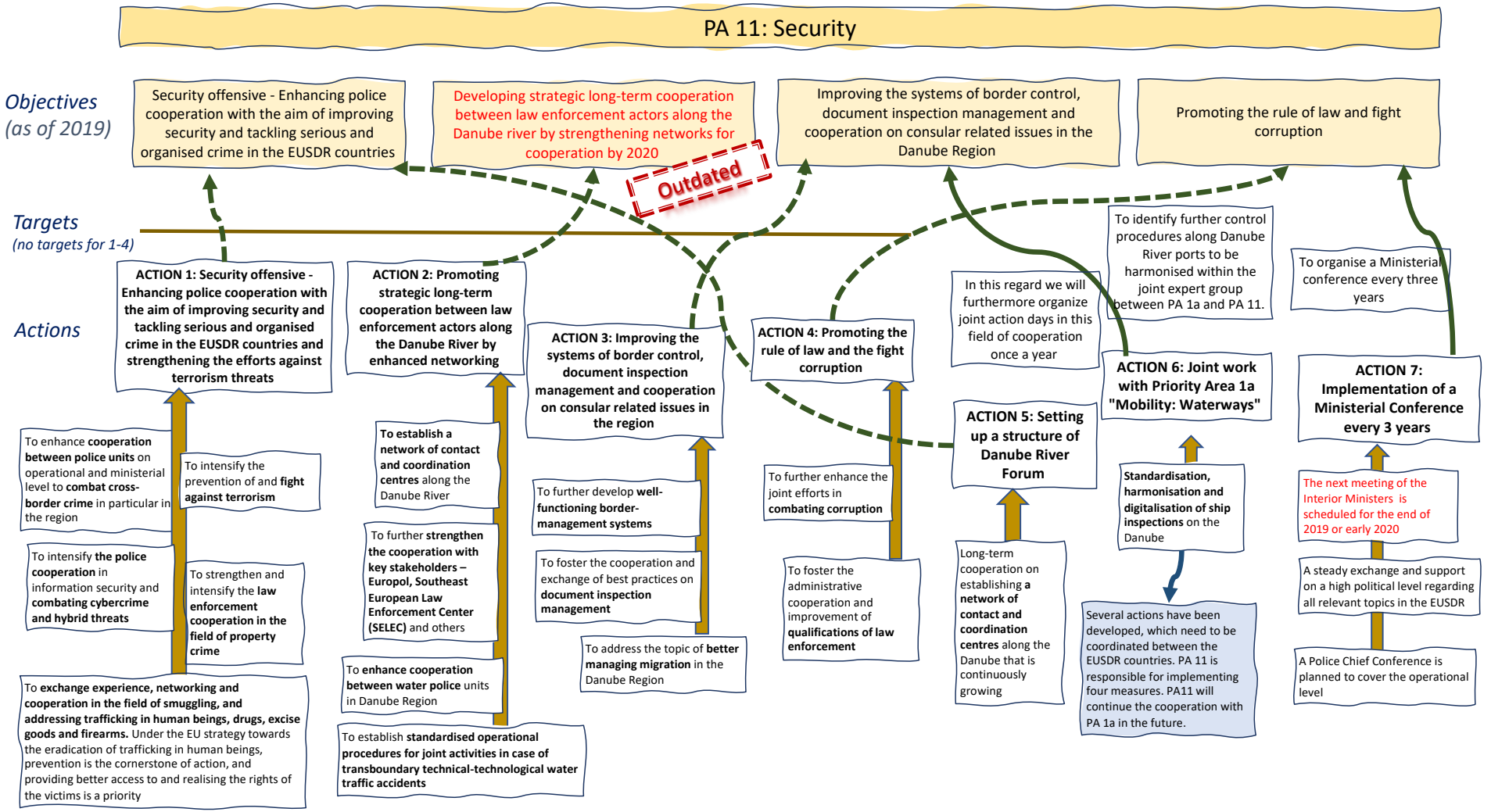

PA 6: Biodiversity and landscapes, quality of air and soils
Objectives (as of 2019)
Milestones For 2030
Actions
Improve management of Natura 2000 sites and other protected areas through transnational cooperation and capacity building
Strengthen the efforts to halt the deterioration in the status of species and habitats occurring in the Danube Region and covered by EU nature legislation and in particular to continue the ongoing work and efforts to securing viable populations of Danube sturgeon species
Reduce the introductions and spread of Invasive Alien Species (IAS) in the region
Maintain and restore Green and Blue Infrastructure elements through integrated spatial development and conservation planning
To improve and/or maintain the soil quality in the region
To decrease air pollution in the region
Developed Danube Masterplan for the Conservation and Restoration of Biodiversity Values; identified measures for mainstreaming it into inland navigation programmes and integration with the navigation Master Plan.
Events (workshop, conference); report on best practices (case studies)
Enforced sturgeon catch moratoriums/ restrictions across borders, governance and funding framework for ex-situ conservation measures; mapped habitats and measures for conservation and/or restoration of their habitats taken; harmonised monitoring programmes
Developed 1) early warning and rapid response system; 2) action plan(s) for the priority pathways at regional level; 3) transboundary eradication plans (incl. measures for restoration of invaded ecosystems)
Established transnational working group and communication platform; adapted toolbox for identification of corridors and WebGis tool for future use; technical handbook on ecological connectivity in the region; harmonised dataset and ecological connectivity map for the EUSDR; selected pilot regions
No milestones defined
Guidelines for developing harmonised soil map; developed soil maps for countries
Locations contaminated with obsolete pesticide and similar chemical remains per Danube Region country mapped in GIS; developed intervention plan on the national and regional level and risk management plan
Identified institutional capacity gaps; identified measures and instruments to gradually reduce the pollution; developed Air Protection Programme
No milestones defined
ACTION 1: Establish transnational cooperation and harmonisation of the strategic management documents between protected areas on river systems in the Danube basin
ACTION 2: Build capacities of national and local authorities, non-governmental organisations, expert and scientific community in the environment related matters
ACTION 3: Develop and/or implement conservation action plans and/or management plans for endangered umbrella species
ACTION 4: Promote research to develop and apply the most appropriate methods for prevention and control of IAS and for management of the priority pathways in line with the DIAS Strategy and IAS Regulation (EU) 1143/2014
ACTION 5: Anchoring the concept of EU green infrastructure in the region
ACTION 6: Promote ecological connectivity through cooperation between macro-regional strategies (MRS)
ACTION 7: Enhance and/or maintain soil-related ecosystem services (ES)
ACTION 8: Identify locations with obsolete pesticide and similar chemical remains and prepare a remediation plan and a risk management plan in the case of environmental accidents
ACTION 9: Take measures to gradually reduce air pollution, with as a minimum step to respect the limit values for pollutants according to the Air Quality Directive
ACTION 10: Stimulate the management and the ecological restoration of wetlands, particularly in the Danube delta
Develop (in a participatory manner) a Danube Masterplan for the Conservation and Restoration of Biodiversity Values for mainstreaming into inland navigation programmes and integration with the navigation Master Plan for the Danube (Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan for the Danube and its navigable tributaries).
Strengthen horizontal knowledge transfer and access to environmental data between national authorities responsible for nature conservation (especially those of neighbouring countries).
Implementation of the Danube-related measures from the Pan-European action plan for sturgeon conservation will contribute to their protection and protection of other freshwater species and their habitats
Transboundary eradication plans could help ensure both pooling the resources and sustainability of applied measures.
Apart from eradication measures, in order to be (more) successful, eradication plans should also include appropriate measures for restoration of the invaded ecosystems
Development of a common approach to define and determine ecological corridors for key target species on land and improve the communication, knowledge and data sharing between environmental, transport and spatial planning sectors on spatial integration of green and blue infrastructure.
Establish the cooperation between the MRS approaches in establishing ecological connectivity and Green Infrastructure.
Follow-up to the meeting on biodiversity (esp. ecological connectivity) in EU macro-regional strategies, 04-05 Dec. 2019, Zagreb.
Develop harmonised soil maps for region. This includes preparation of data harmonisation and definition of scales and data formats in addition to numerous other activities (e.g. scientific workshops and collaboration on soil research).
To prepare a list of identified locations together with priority status and overview of location status that could be used for preparation of more detailed Remediation Plans (RPs).
Risk management plans (RMPs) should address effective management systems on both national and regional level, including the best available techniques to prevent, control and mitigate environmental accidents.
Develop an Air Protection Programme for the region.
To implement management structures to monitor and counteract wetland losses, and to stop wetland losses and promote the restoration of degraded wetlands, with a particular attention to the Danube delta


PA 7: Knowledge Society
Objectives (as of 2019)
To support education, research and ICT in the region by improvement of framework conditions for building a knowledge society
To contribute to an increasing level and quality of network activities, strengthening the existing links and fostering new cooperation in the region
To strengthen the realization of the European Research Area in the region
To revert brain drain and foster brain circulation
To further implement Smart Specialization Strategies in all Danube countries
NO targets
Actions
ACTION 1: To promote coordination of national, regional and EU funds to stimulate excellence in R&I, in research areas specific for Danube Region
ACTION 2: To promote participation of Danube countries in EU R&I Programmes, in particular in Horizon Europe
ACTION 3: To strengthen cooperation among universities, research organisations and SMEs in the region
ACTION 4: To increase awareness and visibility of science and innovation in the region
ACTION 5: To support exchange of information and experience sharing for the purpose of preparation of future strategic R&I documents applicable in the new programming period
ACTION 6: To promote horizontal cooperation in science and technology across all PAs and other MRS
To ensure continuation of successfully established platforms like the Danube IncoNet and the Danube Funding Coordination Network.
To stimulate participation in EUREKA and EIT activities.
To contribute to the fulfilment of the policy objective PO 1 "a smarter Europe" and to full compliance with European Research Area objectives and priorities
The careers of young researchers as well as of female researchers shall be facilitated
The quality and professionalism of R&I management and administration in the institutions of the region shall be improved
Promote investment in research and innovation infrastructures, capacities and skills.
Support the creation of new centres of excellence by 2030 as lighthouse projects for the modernization of the R&I system. In particular, support applications in the framework of Horizon's "Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation" to research institutions in less performing countries.
Use European networking schemes such as COST and TWINNING as platforms for creating better connectivity between Danube research institutions.
Encouraging research and academia in participating in transnational clusters
Making use of the European University Business Cooperation Framework (2018 study, Country reports 2017, University Business Fora)
Support projects that aim at making the Danube Region more attractive for especially young and female researchers, supporting brain circulation and preventing brain drain.
To further promote, implement and make use of the smart specialisation strategies in the whole Danube Region.
To continue close cooperation with national and EU institutions in charge (in particular with the JRC).
To implement common activities like joint Steering Group meetings, joint support for project proposals, workshops etc.; providing and building on scientific evidence, publications etc. especially where these refer to the region (e.g. JRC reports).


PA 8: Competitiveness of enterprises
Objectives (as of 2019)
To support and improve the competitiveness of the region by generating concrete technology offers, technology requests and expressions of interest in the field of innovation and technology transfer
To improve policy dialogue and public governance in innovation and technology transfer by promoting adequate policies and policy papers
To improve digital skills of entrepreneurs
To establish Trans-Danube Digital Value Chains based on transnational Open Data Lakes
To improve know-how transfer about Digital Innovations to local small and medium-sized enterprises
Mapping and evaluation process/benchmarking of the state of the art in terms of the level and quality of the collaboration of the clusters with the regional development stakeholders
To improve the innovation capacity of female SMEs
To identify a level of development and ambitions of the domain artificial intelligence in the individual Danube countries/regions, contribution to the smooth fit of the respective strengths and identification of potential flagship applications for the region
Foster cooperation and continuous discussion between national/regional policy level and SMEs regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI) / how to integrate national/regional AI platforms.
Fostering the development of methods of the regional strategies by more intense involvement of the cluster representatives in the process. The main aim is to improve the current system and to overcome the current gap between regional strategies and cluster strategies, especially in terms of S3 implementation
Targets
TARGET 1.1: Preparation of at least five concrete technology offers and requests
TARGET 1.2: Involvement of at least 10 new Danube actors in EU innovation and technology transfer financed projects
TARGET 2: Establishment of at least two Trans-Danube Digital Value Chains by Mid 2022
TARGET 3: Fostering the interplay between cluster initiatives and regional developers through at least one event until Dec 2021
TARGET 4.1: Development of at least one innovative and practical solution (tool) for strengthening female entrepreneurial skills in the digital age through at least one tailored event.
TARGET 4.2: Organization of at least one networking event for exchange of experience between business and academia
TARGET 5: to co-invest together with Member States and regions in Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) that diffuse Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity and High Performance Computing in all regions in Europe, possibly supported by the Digital Europe Programme. Concretely, to set up 5 new DIHs in the Danube Region until the end of 2024.
Actions
ACTION 1: To foster cooperation and exchange of knowledge between SMEs, creative industry, academia, the public sector and civil society in areas of competence in the region
ACTION 2: Establishment of an Innovative Digital Ecosystem in the region in order to support SMEs when tackling the challenges of a digitalised world
ACTION 3: Improvement of framework conditions, support programs and capacity building of stakeholders, to enhance the collaboration between cluster initiatives and regional innovation strategies, with an accent on rural areas
ACTION 4: ACTION 4: To improve business support to strengthen the innovative and digital capacities of female-led-SMEs
ACTION 5: Enhance the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies in the region SMEs
Generating policy dialogue
Identification of the main challenges to improve the framework conditions in innovation and technology transfer in the region.
Policy Exploration Systems in innovation and technology transfer to steer the process and make it consistent with the development perspectives of the whole region.
Generating concrete activities and projects (addressing e.g. design for acceptance of new digital tools, better conceived man-machine-interaction)
Actions supporting the internationalisation of SMEs
Facilitating interdisciplinary cooperation in order to create effective synergies for the full exploitation of applicable results in the specific thematic field on innovation and technology transfer
The Innovative Digital Ecosystem shall enable collaborative innovation among different stakeholders, through combining complementary resources, systems and support, with a clear goal to generate domain-based data lakes, new business models, products, features, processes or services
this action aims to understand the interplay between clusters and regional innovation strategies.
Attention shall be given to key success factors of the interplay between them, their respective tasks and responsibilities, and ways to facilitate this kind of cooperation in the post-2020 era.
Support development of innovative and digital capacities of female-led start-ups and dynamically growing SMEs
Combine complementary resources, systems and support, with a clear goal to generate new products, features, processes, services or value
Enhance and permanently update their knowledge in the field of AI to remain competitive
Benefit from enhanced collaboration and interoperability
Matching the top-down policy intentions with the bottom-up operational objectives


PA 9: People and skills
Objectives (as of 2019)
Targets
Actions
Contribute to a higher employment rate, especially through tackling youth and long-term unemployment
Contribute to improved educational outcomes, skills and competences, focusing on learning outcomes for employability, entrepreneurship, innovation, active citizenship and well-being
Contribute to Increased higher quality and efficiency of education, training and labour market systems
Contribute to ensuring inclusive education and training and promoting inclusive labour markets, equal opportunities and non-discrimination as well as the promotion of civic competences and lifelong learning opportunities for all
Contribute to closer cooperation between educational, training and labour market and research institutions
Continue the cross-border dialogue by maintaining at least one Network-Meeting, one Peer-Learning Meeting or one Stakeholder Conference per year
Implement and maintain a "Working Group Digitalisation" together with Social Partners (one meeting per year)
Implement a "Network Empowering Roma" together with PA10 (one meeting per year).
Continue the cross-border dialogue by maintaining at least one Network-Meeting, one Peer-Learning Meeting or one Stakeholder Conference per year.
Strengthen regional exchange, peer learning and cooperation in projects and networks (at least one activity and/or one new project/initiative per year) and make available a Danube Region monitoring tool on current developments in education and training systems
Engage in regular stakeholder and networking meetings to continue the cross-border and transnational dialogue and initiate project development (at least one activity and/or one new project/initiative per year)
Strengthen working together on similar policy challenges and make use of the potential of the Erasmus+ programme to increase the impact of macro-regional cooperation among education and training institutions (at least one activity and/or one new project/initiative per year)
Enhance the dissemination of good practices and lessons learned through thematic events, policy exchange and other forms for knowledge transfer (at least one activity and/or one new project/initiative per year)
ACTION 1: Intensify Cooperation in Labour Market Policies
ACTION 2: Digitalisation and Innovation in the World of Work
ACTION 3: Integration of Vulnerable Groups into the Labour Market
ACTION 4: Fighting Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion for All
ACTION 5: Quality and Efficiency of Education and Training Systems
ACTION 6: Relevant and High-Quality Knowledge, Skills and Competences
ACTION 7: Lifelong Learning and Learning Mobility
ACTION 8: Inclusive Education, Equity, Common Values and Sustainable Development
By intensifying the cooperation between labour market stakeholders' reforms will be enhanced.
The focus will be on active labour market policies, common peer learning/peer counselling in the Danube Region, skills mismatch, labour market information systems, vocational re-education and re-training, dual education as a measure of active labour market policies, transition from school to work.
Reduce the lack of knowledge and skills in IT, exchange and development of common social security standards for platform and crowd work
Necessary adaptions of existing labour law in the region
Tailor made measures and projects developed with the concerned groups, e.g. case management
TOGETHER WITH PA 10
Subsidies to keep up employment or new models of entrepreneurship for unemployed, social entrepreneurship, or targeted measures for young people to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)
Empowering groups at risk of poverty to get access to the labour market
Diversification of social services and measures developed together with people at risk of poverty
Actions to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty will complement each other and apply on integrated approaches, therefore long term policies are needed.
Enhancing the anticipation of skills needs and strengthen the labour market relevance of skills
Promoting of teaching at all levels
Strengthening vocational education and training (VET), in particular work-based learning in all its forms
Developing quality assurance mechanisms and increasing evidence-based policy and practice to monitor and design reforms
Addressing the development of digital competences, including media literacy, at all levels of learning
Reducing low achievement in basic skills, covering language, literacy, mathematics, science and digital literacy
Strengthening transversal and key competences, in particular entrepreneurship and language competences
Further exploring the potentials of innovative and active pedagogies as well as upgrading educational resources
Promoting the establishment of platforms of "centres of vocational excellence" to act as catalysts for local business investment, supporting local innovation and smart specialisation strategies by ensuring supply of high quality skilled workers through flexible and timely offer of training.
Supporting mobility of learners and teachers as well as partnerships among schools and educational institutions
Promoting balanced mobility and brain circulation as well as reducing brain drain
Addressing the transition phase within education and training and from ET to work, inter alia through high quality guidance
Continuing LLL strategies and promoting adult learning and second chance opportunities
Fostering transparency, validation and recognition of skills and/or qualifications and implementing EQF and NQFs
Reducing early school leaving
Addressing the diversity of learners, enhancing access to quality and inclusive education for all, including disadvantaged groups
-addressing gender gaps in educational training
Promoting civic, intercultural and social competences, ownership of democratic values and fundamental rights at all levels of ET, while tackling discrimination, racism and stereotypes
Enhancing critical thinking, along with cyber and media literacy
Promoting sustainable development through ET


PA 10: Institutional Capacity and Cooperation
Objectives (as of 2019)
Strengthening institutional capacities to improve decision-making and administrative performance
Enhancing coordination and knowledge for better use of funding and to develop needs-based funding instruments
Increasing involvement of civil society and local actors for effective policy-making and implementation
Targets
TARGET 1.1: Building capacities for efficient, effective and transparent public administration through e-Government/digitalisation of public services
TARGET 1.2: Developing policy guidance for co-designing policies at all levels in the Danube Region.
TARGET 2: Establishing structures to contribute to the facilitation of cross-border capacity building and cooperation through facilities such as cooperation platforms, knowledge transfer, and project development for cross-border public services.
TARGET 3: Building capacities on funding possibilities at international, EU, national, regional, and local level and transnational project implementation through regular consultation formats
TARGET 4: Continue and strengthen the exchange between the EUSDR and funding instruments in the Danube Region on transnational/macro-regional cooperation through network meetings at least once a year
TARGET 5: Developing at least one innovative funding instrument with a particular focus on needs of local actors and civil society.
TARGET 6: Encouraging all EUSDR partner countries to involve national, regional and local authorities, as well as civil society organisations and further relevant stakeholders in the communication and implementation of the EUSDR through implementing national/regional Participation Days.
TARGET 7.1: Supporting the empowerment of young people for participation in the development of the Danube Region through strategic guidance and the implementation of macro-regional networks.
TARGET 7.2: Building capacities on participatory governance and involvement of civil society and local actors in cooperation with the Danube Local Actors Platform, the Danube Civil Society Forum, and/or further experts and stakeholders
TARGET 8.1: Implementing a Network "Empowerment Roma" together with Priority Area 9 (through at least one stakeholder meeting per year)
TARGET 8.2: Implementing a Network on "Fighting Trafficking in Human Beings" together with Priority Area 11 (through at least one stakeholder meeting per year)
Actions
ACTION 1: To improve institutional capacities in order to provide high-quality public services
ACTION 2: To facilitate the administrative cooperation of communities living in border regions
ACTION 3: To review bottlenecks relating to the low absorption rate of EU funds and Invest EU
ACTION 4: To support better coordination of funding
ACTION 5: To test and support innovative funding solutions (for local actors and civil society)
ACTION 6: To foster cooperation built on mutual trust between state and non-state actors to enhance well-being for the inhabitants of the region
ACTION 7: To strengthen the involvement of civil society and local actors in the region
ACTION 8: To enhance capacities of cities and municipalities to facilitate local and regional development
Enhancing needs-based and high-quality public services.
Reducing administrative burden
Strengthening cooperation capacities for all stakeholders in the multi-level governance system
Improving institutional capacities to implement e-Governance
Activities such as diminishing or eliminating legal and administrative obstacles
Developing joint cross-border public services and governance structures contribute to improve the competitiveness of border regions
Building capacities of project promoters for better coordination of funds
Better coordination of funding
Capitalisation and coordination networks between programmes
Review factors that impede joint planning and programming, particularly between EU members and non-EU members
Better coordination at programme level
Funding of projects should be linked to objectives and approaches of mandatory plans required under EU acquis
Supporting the development and testing of innovative funding instruments that suits the needs of different stakeholder groups
Suitable funding should aim supporting broad stakeholder involvement in regional development
Implementing dialogue platforms, trainings and mutual learning on participatory governance co-designing public policies at macro-regional level
Mutual exchange of good practices of trust building initiatives
Participation Days and further dialogue formats further enhance capacities to engage in participatory processes
To strengthen their political capital to engage in a transparent and responsive decision-making process and policy implementation
Mutual learning and capacity building strengthen the ability of state and non-state actors to jointly develop and foster the practice and implementation of EUSDR's placed based approach
Youth participation and civic engagement in order to ensure a long-term perspective on regional development and sustainable democracy
Drafting territorial strategies or establishing cooperation and participatory policies are pre-requisites for high quality regional development
TOGETHER WITH PA 9 AND PA 11
Local actors shall be supported in increasing capacities for cooperation and service provision in the area of Roma inclusion, fighting trafficking in human beings, spatial planning and cooperation in functional regions


PA 11: Security
Objectives (as of 2019)
Security offensive - Enhancing police cooperation with the aim of improving security and tackling serious and organised crime in the EUSDR countries
Developing strategic long-term cooperation between law enforcement actors along the Danube river by strengthening networks for cooperation by 2020
Outdated
Improving the systems of border control, document inspection management and cooperation on consular related issues in the Danube Region
Promoting the rule of law and fight corruption
Targets (no targets for 1-4)
Actions
ACTION 1: Security offensive - Enhancing police cooperation with the aim of improving security and tackling serious and organised crime in the EUSDR countries and strengthening the efforts against terrorism threats
ACTION 2: Promoting strategic long-term cooperation between law enforcement actors along the Danube River by enhanced networking
ACTION 3: Improving the systems of border control, document inspection management and cooperation on consular related issues in the region
ACTION 4: Promoting the rule of law and the fight corruption
ACTION 5: Setting up a structure of Danube River Forum
ACTION 6: Joint work with Priority Area 1a "Mobility: Waterways"
ACTION 7: Implementation of a Ministerial Conference every 3 years
To enhance cooperation between police units on operational and ministerial level to combat cross-border crime in particular in the region
To intensify the prevention of and fight against terrorism
To intensify the police cooperation in information security and combating cybercrime and hybrid threats
To strengthen and intensify the law enforcement cooperation in the field of property crime
To exchange experience, networking and cooperation in the field of smuggling, and addressing trafficking in human beings, drugs, excise goods and firearms. Under the EU strategy towards the eradication of trafficking in human beings, prevention is the cornerstone of action, and providing better access to and realising the rights of the victims is a priority
To establish a network of contact and coordination centres along the Danube River
To further strengthen the cooperation with key stakeholders – Europol, Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) and others
To enhance cooperation between water police units in Danube Region
To establish standardised operational procedures for joint activities in case of transboundary technical-technological water traffic accidents
To further develop well-functioning border-management systems
To foster the cooperation and exchange of best practices on document inspection management
To address the topic of better managing migration in the Danube Region
To further enhance the joint efforts in combating corruption
To foster the administrative cooperation and improvement of qualifications of law enforcement
In this regard we will furthermore organize joint action days in this field of cooperation once a year
Long-term cooperation on establishing a network of contact and coordination centres along the Danube that is continuously growing
To identify further control procedures along Danube River ports to be harmonised within the joint expert group between PA 1a and PA 11.
Standardisation, harmonisation and digitalisation of ship inspections on the Danube
Several actions have been developed, which need to be coordinated between the EUSDR countries. PA 11 is responsible for implementing four measures. PA11 will continue the cooperation with PA 1a in the future.
To organise a Ministerial conference every three years
The next meeting of the Interior Ministers is scheduled for the end of 2019 or early 2020
A steady exchange and support on a high political level regarding all relevant topics in the EUSDR
A Police Chief Conference is planned to cover the operational level

Annex IX Analysis of PA impact pathways

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
Pillar 1: Connecting the Region				
1A Waterway mobility	• Improved mobility and multimodality – on inland waterways	• Improved navigability with good fairway conditions and well-managed landside infrastructure • Well-functioning inland waterway transport and an adequate business development • Modernised and less-polluting Danube fleet • Harmonized River Information Services on the Danube and its navigable tributaries according to European legal provisions • Qualified personnel and harmonized education standards for professions in Danube navigation • Time-efficient, service-oriented and transparent administrative procedures for navigation	The links between projects/activities and the intermediate targets connecting to the overall mission are overall robust and credible. Important synergies are already sought with PA 1B, PA 3 (ship cruises), PA 8 (business development), PA 9 (skills and training) and PA 11. The change process could eventually benefit from being more integrated into the overall approach to multi-modal transportation in the Region also from the view of climate action as well as stronger links with business sector.	Activities and projects of the EUSDR stakeholders in this concrete and delimited thematic policy field are expected to influence policy and behaviour of its stakeholders. Impact induced by the EUSDR is plausible. External factors, such as the business traction and favourable weather conditions for navigation are of great importance for the created impacts to be also meaningful.
1B Rail-Road-Air Mobility	• Improved mobility and multimodality – for rail, road and air transport	• Efficient freight railway services and improved railway travel times • Alpine-Western Balkan rail freight corridor established • TEN-T extensions to neighbouring countries (non-EU member states) and cross-border challenges tackled • Fully functional multi-modal TEN-T Core Network in DR • Efficient multimodal terminals at sea, river and dry ports	Very broad field of action and very ambitious targets. It is not realistic that all fields can be tackled at the same time or that important contribution to change can be expected in all areas. Projects/activities are sometimes not connected to the expected long-term changes. It is questioned that all expected changes can be achieved especially taken the decreasing commitment evidenced in the PA 1B report to EC. Synergies on multi-modal networks with PA 1A, sustainable tourism mobility with PA 3 and cross-border transport facilitation with PA 11. Important	A very wide field of expected impact, including better connected railway, road and air connections, road safety, bike lanes, urban mobility systems etc. has been defined. Efforts concentrate much on strategic infrastructure projects, less on projects that contribute to policy and behaviour change or create new capacities. External factors and national policies play a very important role. EUSDR can be deemed important to work on cross-country perspective of infrastructure and border challenges.

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
		• Improved regional air connectivity • Improved conditions of secondary and tertiary roads, including border crossings • Safe and sustainable transport and mobility (roads, bikes) • Sustainable transport systems and mobility in the urban and suburban areas	cross-relationships with many other PAs as transport can be considered crucial for economic activity and social life, but new infrastructure also a danger for landscapes and biodiversity, air and water quality. To fit better in the overall EUSDR context, sustainable forms of mobility and better local/regional connectivity could be prioritised by PA 1B.	
2 Sustainable Energy	• More sustainable energy	• Europe 2030 climate and energy targets achieved in the Danube region regarding e.g. low-carbon technologies, renewable energy systems, energy efficiency and energy storage systems • Bottlenecks removed to fulfil the goals of the Energy Union within the Danube Region • Improved cooperation, synergies and joint projects on energy	Broad field and ambitious targets. Good connection of project and activities to expected contribution to change. Important synergies with PA 1A and 1B on sustainable transport, with PA 3 on sustainable tourism, with PA 7, PA 8 and PA 9 on knowledge, business models, skills and competences of enterprises and people with regard to the decarbonisation of the economy and the promotion of green production models. Recommended to be considered a crucial cross-cutting theme in the EUSDR.	Relevant for climate action and linked to the EU Green Deal and a Just Transition. A very important policy field and crucial for the EUSDR priority on climate change and sustainable development. Projects and activities want to influence capacities and a better networking and collaboration for common goals. Efforts address policy and behavioural changes. External factors, functioning of the Energy Union and strong national policies are important in this field. It can be expected that there will be a large amount of EU funds available for projects in this field and the EUSDR could play an important role in structuring and connecting projects and facilitating sharing of results and good practices.
3 Culture and Tourism	• Sustainable tourism in the Danube Region	• Danube Region tourism brands established and promoted • Sustainable tourist products (e.g. eco-tourism) and sustainable mobility solutions for tourists developed • Quality and innovation integrated in tourism products and tourism enterprises	Concrete thematic policy field with an overall patchy and diverse actions and activities. Although a link from projects via activities and actions to the two layers of PA objectives (sub-objectives and objectives) is well visible, however the lack of targets allows assessing the ToC impact pathways as only moderate. Hence a reference for induced change would be recommended. It could as well be	Expected change focuses on the development of sustainable tourism in the Danube Region (offer and promotion). Tourism builds on natural and cultural heritage as well as people to people contacts but requires also coordinated public and private action in many different policy areas, such as transport, environmental protection, SME support, cluster development, education and training, technology development. It will be

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
		• Training and education offer for a skilled labour force in tourism	linked to the EUSDR strategic and governance action. Important synergies with PA 1A and 1B on sustainable transport for tourists, PA 2 for sustainable energy solutions in tourism sectors, PA 11 for a safe and secure travel, and with PA 7, PA 8 and PA 9 on knowledge, business models, skills and competences of enterprises and people with regard to tourism. Tourism is an important motor for local sustainable and economic development in rural and peripheral territories. Recommended to be considered a crucial cross-cutting theme in the EUSDR and beyond in MRS.	necessary to connect to relevant stakeholders in all these fields to achieve the expected change. External factors can be considered as less important and EUSDR actions can play an important role in promoting sustainable tourism in the Region. Most regions in the Danube Region show an important growth potential for tourism and might require guidance and support.
Pillar 2: Protecting the Environment				
4 Water quality	• Good quality of waters restored or maintained	• Water pollution prevented or reduced • Water resources protected and drinking water supply ensured • Adaptation to climate change with regard to water quality • Effective water management plans developed • Sub-basin management plans	Concrete policy field with well-defined areas of action. Thematic actions are proposed to structure the work on relevant factors that influence water quality in the Danube region. Although a link from projects via activities and actions to the PA objectives is well visible, the lack of quantified targets allows assessing the ToC impact pathways as only moderate. A reference for induced change would be recommended. It could as well be linked to the EUSDR strategic and governance action. Important synergies with PA 1A (water transport), PA 5 (with regard to water management and disaster prevention) and PA 6 (with regard to biodiversity on aquatic ecosystems).	Water quality is of macro-regional interest as it is influenced by many different stakeholders and affects all countries and regions. The PA expects impacts in the medium and long-term produced by common action and agreed actions (e.g., on standards, protection measures, prevention, water management). Many factors are tackled by prevention measures, harmonised tools and coordination Other external factors still can be important.

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
5 Environmental Risks	• Well managed environmental risks	• Potential impacts of climate change are well-known and adaptation and mitigation measures in place to prevent negative impacts of severe weather phenomena (e.g. droughts, floods) • Reduced flood risks through well-managed flood risk management plans • Up-to-date knowledge and monitoring of accident hazard spots and disaster risks • Strengthened disaster prevention and preparedness	Concrete policy field with well-defined areas of action. Strong linkages from projects and actions to expected impact. Different types of risk are addressed by actions. The defined targets for strategic and governance actions provides a good reference for ToC assessment. Important synergies with PA 4 (with regard to water management), PA 6 (with regard to air and soil quality, biodiversity) and PA 11 (cooperation for security).	Disaster and environmental risks are of macro-regional interest as they affect all countries and regions. Cross-country coordination and cooperation are critical for impact in this area. Efforts address the coordinated development, implementation and monitoring of strategies, as well as the creation of capacities and the harmonisation of standards and management systems.
6 Biodiversity and landscapes, quality of air and soils	• Preserved biodiversity, good soil quality, less air pollution	• Improved management of Natura 2000 sites • Deterioration in the status of species and habitats stopped • Spread of Invasive Alien Species reduced • New and maintained Green and Blue Infrastructure • Better or maintained soil quality • Reduced air pollution	Concrete policy field with well-defined areas of action as well as targets which are called 'Milestones for 2030' for this PA. Thematic actions are proposed to structure the work on relevant factors that influence biodiversity and quality of air and soils in the Danube region. Overall strong causal linkages from activities to the expected impact. Two impact pathways (Action 6 and 10) lack milestones and hence their ToC is assessed as moderate. Important synergies with PA 1A and 1B (transport), PA 2 (landscapes, air quality), PA 3 (environmental effects of tourism), PA 4 (water quality), PA 5 (risk management), PA 7 (research cooperation) and PA 8 (effects of production on biodiversity and land use).	Concrete policy field with important links to most PAs. Crucial for the EUSDR priority on climate change and sustainable development. Air quality, invasive alien species, ecosystem services and ecological connectivity are topics of macro-regional interest. Expected impact is not only on environmental indicators but also addresses public awareness for the need of nature and environmental protection, as well as knowledge dissemination and use of best available practices as important intermediate steps to achieve policy and behaviour change. External factors and national policies and systems have a strong influence on expected impact.
Pillar 3: Building Prosperity				
7 Knowledge society	• Developed knowledge society	• Increased level and quality of network activities in research and education	Broad and rather vague structure of the impact pathways prevents from explicitly establishing the envisaged changed in the areas of research,	Very broad policy field with clear stakeholders (universities, regional innovation systems, research centres). The role of the EUSDR action

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
		• Danube Region as active part of the European Research Area • Talent is retained in the Danube region (brain drain turned to brain circulation)	education and innovation. Focus and contribution of EUSDR in this field is not clear at the level of actions. Lack of quantified targets allows assessing the ToC impact pathways as only moderate. Some examined strategic projects demonstrate a clear added value by addressing relevant EUSDR policy fields (e.g., research for sustainable energy, or knowledge hub for Danube river-related policies) or adding a macro-regional perspective to on-going research and innovation work (e.g. Danube Funding Coordination Network, Danube region EUREKA call). Synergies with all other PAs could be strengthened by specific input from research, and support via education and training.	to expected impact is not clear, impact of EUSDR action is not defined. Work of PA 7 is organised in Working Groups on Higher education and mobility, ITC, Danube Funding Coordination Network (DFCN), RIS3, Research and Innovation. Expected impact depends widely on external factors. A more specific formulation of expected impact of EUSDR work in different thematic fields would be more realistic.
8 Competi-tiveness	• Competitive enterprises and active clusters	• Concrete technology offers, technology requests and expressions of interest formulated in the field of innovation and technology transfer • Improved policy dialogue and public governance in innovation and technology transfer • Improved digital innovation by SMEs and digital skills of entrepreneurs • Trans-Danube Digital Value Chains established • Enhanced role of clusters in regional innovation systems • Improved innovation capacity of SMEs (especially female) • Integrated national/regional AI platforms.	A general realistic and plausible mission within the EUSDR is missing. Selective formulation of targets and actions linked to strategic projects. ToC that concentrates on certain actions is overall clear and robust. A few actions (Action 3 and 5) are defined too vaguely for the ToC to be established. Hence their impact pathways are assessed as moderate. Overlaps exist with PA 7 with regard to innovation. Apparent links to other PAs are missing (e.g. synergies with the development of tourism value chains with PA 3, or decarbonisation of production with PA 2).	Very broad policy field addressed from different perspectives. Expected impacts are linked to relevant working groups. Expected value seems to be connected to results and outcomes of specific projects. An EUSDR perspective of benefit or impact for the Danube region is missing. External factors (e.g. macroeconomic situation) are very important for any change to be observed in this field. A clear description of macro-regional added value is missing.

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
9 People and Skills	• Better skills and competences, effective and inclusive labour markets	• Higher employment rate, less youth and long-term unemployment • Improved educational outcomes, skills and competences • Increased quality and efficiency of inclusive training and labour market systems • Closer cooperation between educational, training, labour market and research institutions, in particular on transnational and regional levels	Well-defined intervention logic with thematic action lines, objectives and targets per action and good links to the overall mission. Focus of EUSDR contribution on cooperation and support to policy development. Activities concentrated in the fields of coordination, implementation and communication. Important cross-cutting theme. Synergies with all other PAs could be strengthened by specific relationships to other PAs (e.g. skills and training for sustainable tourism with PA 3, skills for entrepreneurial discovery with PA 8, skills and knowledge for low-carbon technologies with PA 2).	Broad policy field, partially overlapping with PA 7 on education. Eight action lines with different thematic foci reaching from inequalities, inclusion for marginalised communities to life-long-learning and skills for innovation and IT. Concentration of PA work on 1) Cooperation among institutions and 2) Support to policy development as expected outcomes. Expected impact seems realistic ('Contribution to..'). External factors and national policies and systems have a strong influence on general impact.
Pillar 4: Strengthening the Region				
10 Institutional Capacity and Cooperation	• Strengthened institutional capacities and cooperation	• Strengthened institutional capacities to improve decision-making and administrative performance • Increased involvement of civil society and local actors • Enhanced coordination and knowledge for better use of funding and to develop needs-based funding instruments	Well-defined intervention logic with thematic action lines, objectives and targets per action and good links to the overall mission. Focus of EUSDR contribution on cooperation and support to policy development. Important cross-cutting theme, in particular when it comes to project capacities to absorb EU funds and better coordination of funding. PA's role is more towards servicing other PAs and supporting their governance type of actions – capacity building and fund-raising as well as to set agendas for some topics, such as through continuing to develop the participation day and maintaining the Danube Local Actors Platform. Synergies should be sought also with the EUSDR Communication Strategy 2020 and its actions towards the civil society which is one of the external communication target groups.	Concrete field of action, connected to management and coordination capacities in all other PAs. Strong strategic and governance actions organised in three sub-themes – institutional capacities, funding and civil society. Each of the eight action lines has concrete targets. Concentration of PA work on developing policy guidance and tools and strengthening exchange. Expected impact is realistic. External factors have a strong influence on general impact.

PA	Mission	Expected long-term changes and thematic objectives	Assessment of Theory of Change	Assessment of expected impact
11 Security	• Danube region as a safe and secure place to live, work and travel	• Enhanced police cooperation with the aim of improving security and tackling serious and organised crime • Strategic long-term cooperation between law enforcement actors along the Danube River • Improved systems of border control • Rule of law strengthened and reduced corruption	Overall well-defined intervention logic, though targets are missing for most actions and hence the impact pathways are assessed as moderate. Four action lines feed into the expected impact, while three action lines address overall cooperation and support to another PA (1A). Important cross-cutting theme, active cooperation with PAs 1A and 1B, also PA 10.	Concrete field of action. Important element contributing to the level of security in the Region and enhancing networking and concerted action with other PAs. PA 11 sees its impact as contribution to more and better exchange of best practices and networking. Well-embedded into the overall EUSDR. Horizontal cooperation with the other PAs is seen as essential. External factors have a strong influence on general impact.